



MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

FANTASY

Magazine
Issue #35

\$5.95

India Edghill
Steven Piziks
Laura J. Underwood
An interview with
Susan Schwartz



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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S FANTASY

Magazine

HOW DO YOU TELL A WIZARD OR A SORCERESS?

AND WHAT DO YOU TELL 'EM?

I tend to feel that the mistakes I find in young writers are often due to their youth — “puppy fur”, I sometimes call it — but recently, in seeing again the reissue of *STAR WARS*, I found a remembered fault which I had barely noticed at the time. Certainly, I said to myself, a professional like George Lucas would never commit such a beginner’s fault — but he did; I heard it for myself. Early on, in a conversation between Uncle Owen and the young Luke Skywalker, speaking of Obi-wan Kenobi — or Old Ben Kenobi, as he is then known, one of them says, “Ah, that wizard’s only a crazy old man.”

Now, wait a cotton-pickin’ minute here; how do we know old Ben, or Obi-wan, is a wizard? I stopped to think this through; how do we know the old gentleman is a wizard?

Well, he’s a wizard because...because...because George Lucas **said** so!

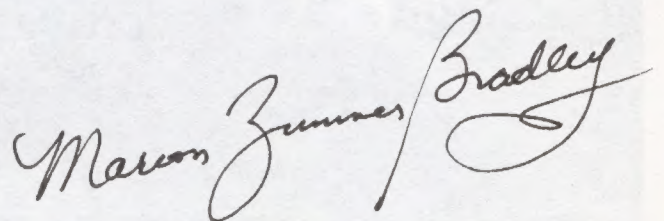
Hey, George — calling somebody a wizard doesn’t make him one, any more than someone calling somebody a sorceress on page one of an amateur manuscript makes her one. This is a prime example of what’s meant by “Show, don’t tell”.

Don’t tell us that so-and-so is a wizard or a sorceress; show us by showing her or him doing some wizardry or sorcery. If, for instance, the so-called sorceress says “Open Sesame” and a great cave of jewels opens, it’s pretty obvious that she knows something about sorcery — or, as the case may be, wizardry.

I can see why in a very short story some things may be acceptable as established. One does not need to prove that an enchanted cat is not a tabby, or an enchanted lion is not an ordinary mouser. Yet in the best fantasies, some thought is given to the establishing of a fantastic setting. Stop and think: how do we know that C.S. Lewis’s Aslan is not a teddy bear? In Tolkien’s epic he first stops and explains “What is a hobbit?” very briefly, and then says clumsily, “Now you know enough to be going on with.”

In a short story one does not need pagefuls of explanation as to what a sorceress is; that gets you into absurdities like the manuscript I’ve mentioned more than once where the would-be writer with his handsome stationery told us that he knew the heroine was an Amazon by the three little strips of white leather which comprised her costume. This was the manuscript where I pointed out that after a day in the saddle clothed only in little strips of white leather they (as well as her skin) would be neither clean nor white... Well, all that’s as it may be; I almost regret that a chap with this much imagination was never heard from again. He had vivid imagery which might have done well when he’d outgrown his puppy fur. But his reaction to my well-meant critique was to fire me off a letter stating that my criticism was not worth reading because I used a comma instead of a colon after “Dear So and so.” I plead guilty — I’m teaching writing, not fifth grade grammar.

I only wish so many of you didn’t need a fifth grade grammar teacher!



A TOWERING NEW FANTASY FROM TOR!

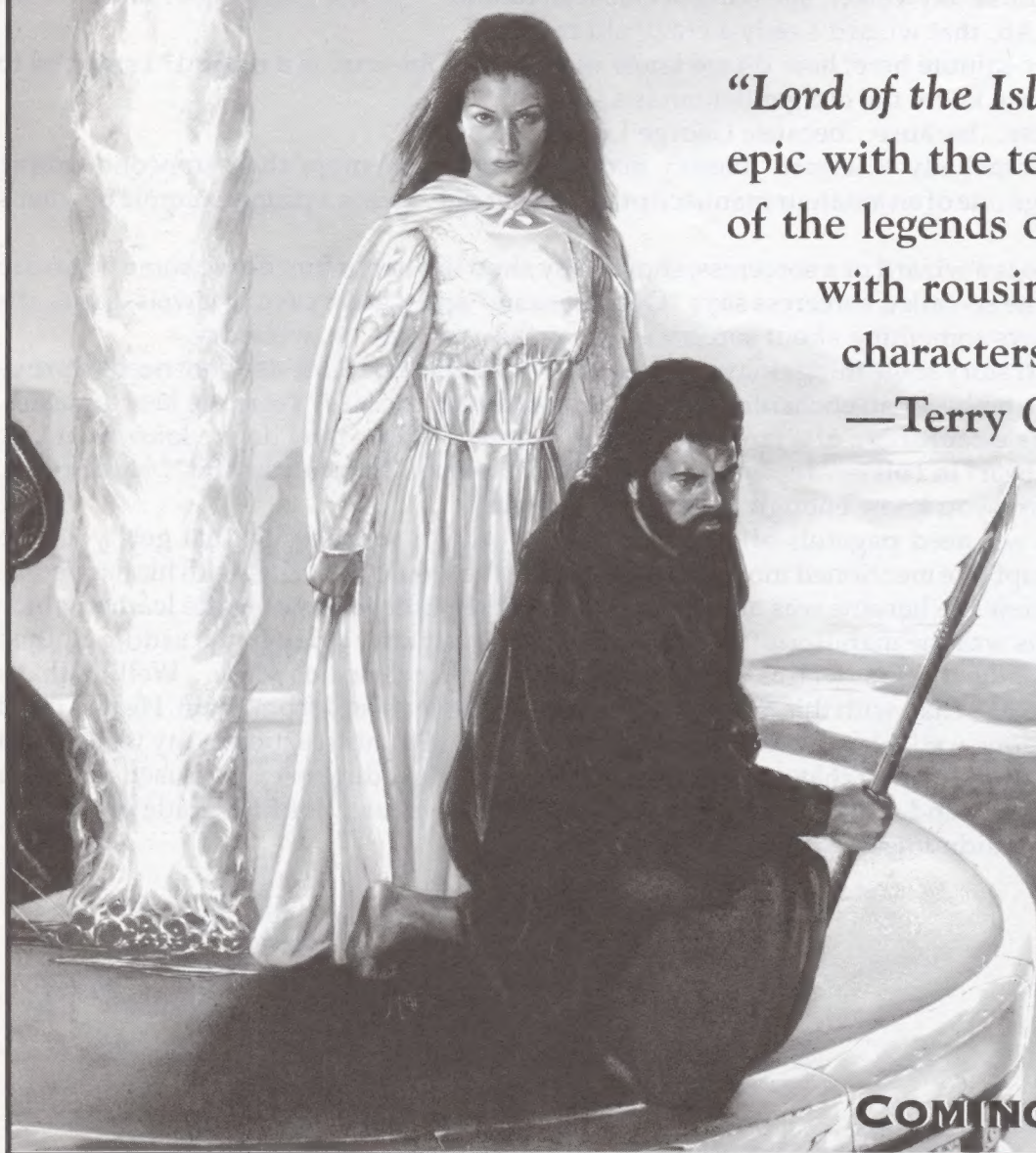
An extraordinary epic adventure begins with . . .

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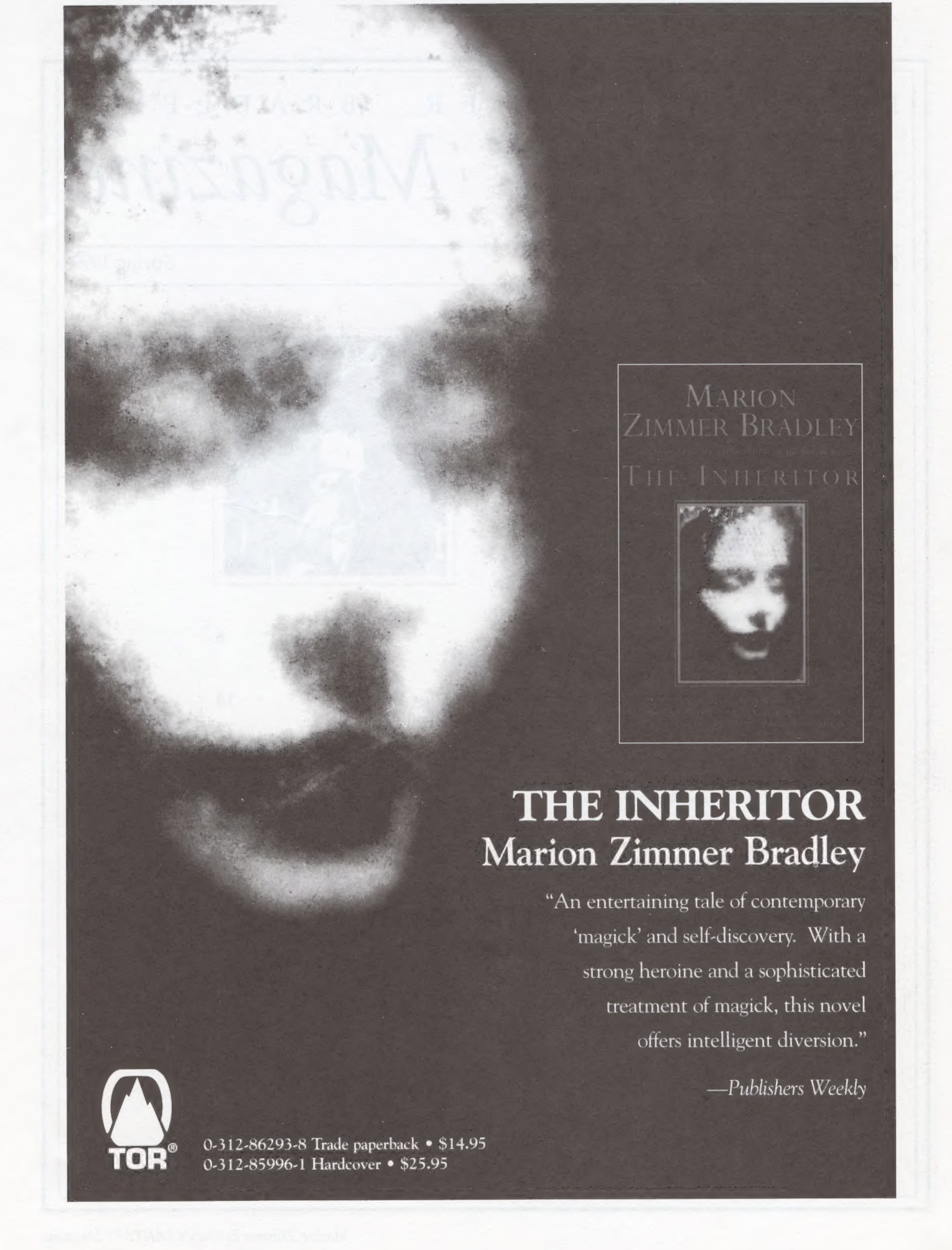
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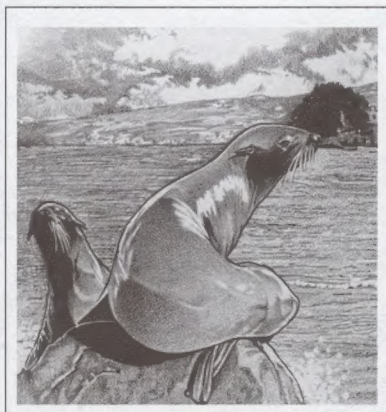
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Issue #35 - Spring 1997 - Vol. 9 No. 3

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY Magazine

ISSN 0897-9286 - Published by the Marion Zimmer Bradley Living Trust, P.O. Box 249, Berkeley, California 94701, (510) 644-9222
<http://www.well.com/user/mzbfm/>

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Subscription rates are \$20.00 for 4 issues in the U.S., \$27.00 in Canada, \$44.00 foreign subscriptions. All subscriptions, including Canadian, are payable directly in U.S. funds only. Individual copies of the current issue are \$5.95 plus shipping. Shipping charges are \$1.00 per copy in U.S., \$2.00 in Canada, foreign \$6.00. **Back issues:** include \$4.95 for each back issue (issues 33 and before). Issue 34 is \$5.95. Include \$2.50 per order shipping in U.S.

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POSTMASTER: Send address changes to:
Marion Zimmer Bradley, P.O. Box 249, Berkeley, CA 94701-0249



Maiden Phoenix

by India Edghill

On the day that the King and Queen of Faerie indulged in what turned out to be one of their most disastrously inconvenient quarrels, Princess Elizabeth of England was walking alone in the garden of the Dowager Queen Catherine's house in Chelsea, wondering how she should answer the Lord High Admiral's question. For on that May morning he had caught her behind the cherry tree and asked her to marry him, and this time she thought he meant it.

"Marry me," he had said. "Marry me, my dearest love." And he had tried to kiss her, but she held him off and let him pour love-words into her ears like sweet wine into a golden goblet. "Sweetest life, heart's delight, sweet heart of mine, only say yes —"

"No," she had gasped out, from sheer delight in being contrary, and to see what madness he would come to next.

"Never, without the Council's consent. You know that, Tom."

"I'll have it and you too, you little hellcat!"

"Oh, and a heartbeat ago I was your sweetest little chuck! Unhand me, my lord!" She writhed, supple as an eel, in his grasping arms. "Let me go, Tom! Someone will see —"

"Let them see, by God and Saint George! It's marriage I'm offering, and a Seymour's as good as any —"

"Since my father married your sister!"

He smacked her bottom then, hard enough to feel through skirt and petticoats. "Aye, and don't you forget it, proud miss! Good enough for the king should be good enough for Nan Bullen's brat any day!"

"Too good for me and not good enough. The Council wants it both ways, but they'll never let me marry

you, no, not if love were ever true!" she chanted. She had her father's gift for song, and her mother's for facile rhyme. Her own gifts she still searched for, in mirrors, and in men's eyes.

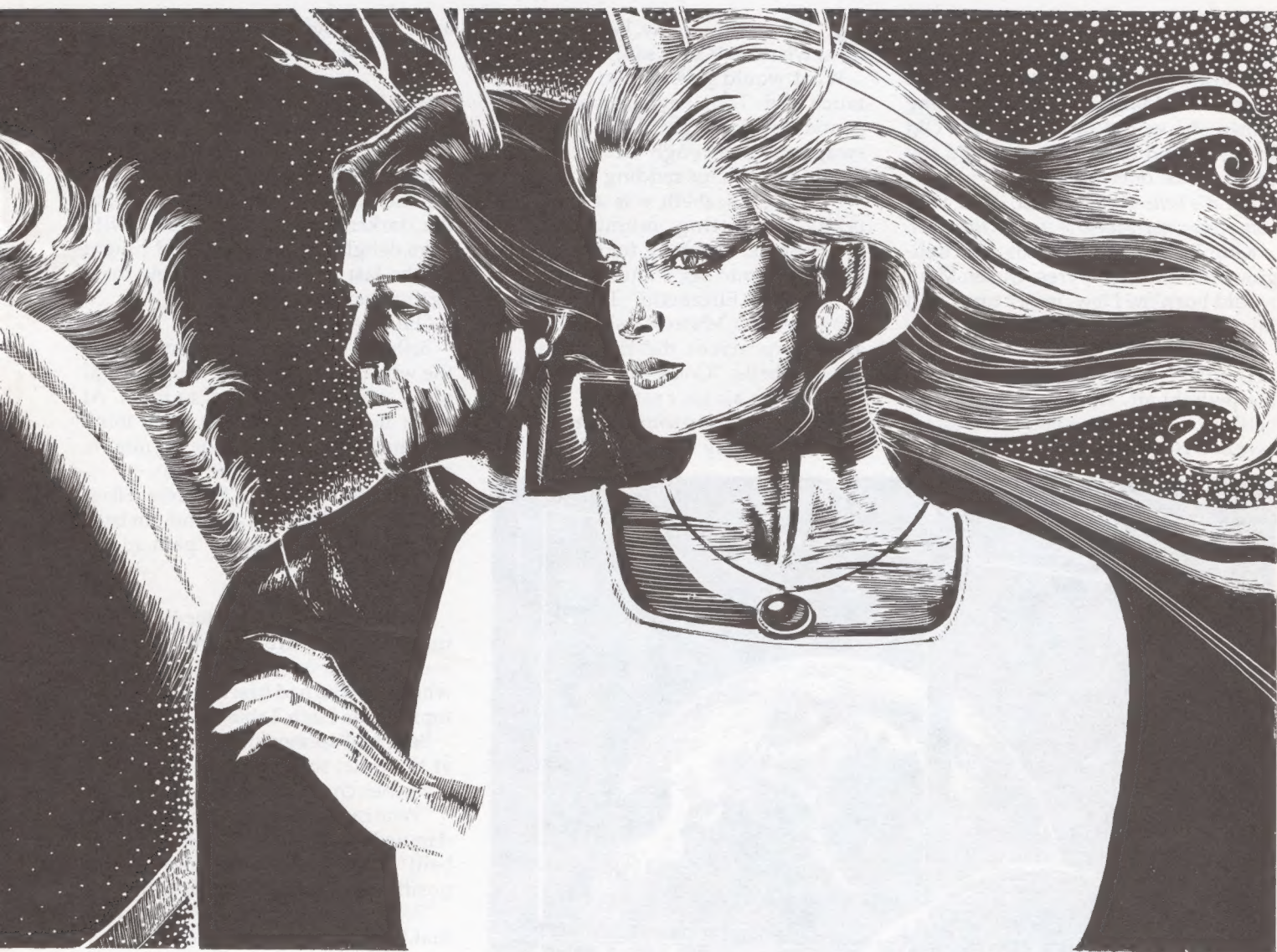
Again he bent to kiss her, but she threw back her head and laughed and spun away, out of his arms, her hair flying fire.

"I said no, Tom, no."

"Damn you!" He lunged for her and caught her up hard against his broad chest, heart to heart. "Hellcat," he said, and kissed her until her mouth was hot and willing and her heart pounded until her whole body shook. And when she hung boneless and trembling in his arms he smiled at her; the victor's smile, who knows that he has won. "Now say you'll marry me, Bess."

"The Council," she gasped. "The succession —"

"The devil fly away with the Coun-



Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

cil, and the crown, and the damned succession too! It's *you* I want, Bess. Come away with me — the world's wider than England. We'll sail the seas and play pirate together, and see the Indies and Cathay. Let's leave the fools to their games of thrones and crowns — ah, my darling Bess —"

"You would marry me without the Council's yea-say? You would have me give up my place in the succession? You would take me away?"

"Haven't I just said so? Now be a good girl and say yes."

Suddenly wild, she twisted out of his encircling arms and danced to the other side of the cherry tree. "I'm my mother's daughter and I never say yea or nay —"

"You ice-hearted wench!" He grabbed around the tree-trunk and caught her hanging velvet sleeve.

"Not ice, true Thomas; I'm all a-fire.

Let me go, I must think, I must — I'll tell you later, later —" Laughing, she pulled free and gathered her skirts and ran. Halfway down the garden path she spun around and called back. "Ask me again, Tom, some other day, if you would have a better answer than maybe!"

Still laughing, she went skipping down the gravel path, making her skirt swing forward and back like a great brocade bell; a child playing with the wind, a woman studying the maze she now must tread. Until today she had thought Tom Seymour's eyes brightened only for the main chance, and himself. Did he truly want Bess Tudor and not the Princess Elizabeth's claim to the crown of England? A novel notion; was she true Thomas's true love?

An incredible fierce desire shook her — but for what? For Tom? For life, and love, and all the bright years he prom-

ised? Or for that other bright passion? The heart, or the crown?

She didn't know. She would find out, she thought, when Thomas asked her again.

But that had been this morning, when all things were bright and all promises kept. It was evening now, when shadows fell on walls, and darkened the clearest pathway. Thomas would ask her again, and she would say — what? She swayed down to pluck up a wayward daisy, rip at its snow-white petals. "Yea, nay," she chanted as they fell. "Yea, nay, may —"

In the distance the new church bell tolled the sunset hour. Not the Angelus, not under the strict reign of her young half-brother King Edward the Sixth, that prim little follower of the New Learning and its pure plain church. If he died — painful thought,

she was fond of Ned. But Ned was ill, more sorely ill than the Council wished men to know. Her half-sister Mary came next; when Mary caught the spinning crown she would bring back the Old Religion, and the new bell would toll the Angelus once more.

But it's bells at sunset still, call it what men please, make them of it what they will.

King Edward burned the Old Religion on Smithfield pyres. Queen Mary would burn the New, in her turn. And Elizabeth?

I burn, but not for God.

The church-bell sang hard through the twilight air. Her blood beat to the bell's iron time; she stood in the shadows of dying light and sang to its toll-

ing. "Yea — nay — may. When Thomas asks, what shall Bess say?"

What would it be safe to say? How much did Tom Seymour mean his proud loud words? Lord Tom-cat, swaggering through life certain it would bend to his bidding —

— while Elizabeth was a small red tabby-cat sitting mumchance at mouseholes, watching for a crown to scuttle out into her waiting claws...

"My lady Elizabeth!" The voice of her governess, Mistress Ashley, cut thin and sharp across the rich sound of evening bells. "Come in at once, child — the night air isn't safe —"

I'm never safe, not while I'm my father's daughter, and my mother's. 'The world's

wider than England —' Do you mean it, Tom? Will you take me away, and love only me?

And because, after all, it was sweet spring, and because, after all, she was only fourteen — and because, above all, she might be loved, and in love, and free, she flung the useless flower into the darkening air and laughed with pure delight as the night wind caught up the last few petals and blew them against her face.

"Elizabeth!"

Bellsong stopped; the wind shook the white petals away. It was night; at night she could be alone, to think. At night alone in her bed she could think of Tom Seymour's lips upon her mouth, his hands upon her eager body —

"Oh, yes," said the Princess Elizabeth to the chill night air, and ran back up the shadow-splashed path to the waiting house.

Bronze bells were sweeter-toned, but iron bells were stronger. At least, so it was said. No one could remember by whom, or who had first introduced this topic at the High Table.

Bells had seemed innocuous enough at the time; so much did, until Their Majesties chose to take an interest.

"Who cares what humans make their damned church bells out of? A bell's a bell!" This had been Oberon's initial position; he was now stuck with it.

"Iron's stronger, dear. We all know that." Titania smiled upon the company assembled in Oberon's Great Hall. "So doesn't it seem logical that an *iron* church bell will be more effective than a *bronze* one, just as an iron blade makes a nastier cut? Or so it seems to me. But then, dear, I'm only a female. I'm sure you think you know best."

"I *do* know best! And bronze bells or iron — what matter? They both clamor loud enough to wake —"

"The dead?" Titania raised the delicate slanting eyebrows that arched over her brilliant eyes. "Really, dear, isn't that the *point*?"

"Human superstition is nothing to me!" Not one of Oberon's wiser comments; Titania laughed.

Titania's laugh had been compared to many things: chiming crystal, spring wind in new leaves, larksong at mid-day. Titania sometimes, when bored, lured human poets beyond the Border; she was, she claimed, collecting a poesy of clichés.

There were other ways of describing



Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

Titania's laugh, however.

"And what's that cat-squalling supposed to mean?" Oberon demanded. "You're the one who started yammering about the blasted bells to start with!"

"I? What interest do I have in church bells? It's much, much — wiser — to stay away from them. But then, I'm quite sensitive."

"Oh, and I'm not, I suppose?"

Titania shrugged; light shimmered from her moonbeam gown. "Still, if you have no interest in bells, not another word do I say about them." Titania picked delicately at some gilded grapes.

"And you agree with me that the new bells make no difference?"

"Of course, dear — if you say so."

"Everyone says so!" Not a wise remark, but Oberon was not necessarily wise. "And I'll prove it to you, and all my doubting court as well. Come on." And Oberon strode off calling for his horses, hawks, and hounds.

Titania licked gold leaf off the largest grape; her tongue was pink and supple, like a cat's. Beyond the Great Hall's crystal doors Oberon could be heard bellowing orders, and courtiers heard scrambling to obey them.

Titania smiled.

The moon rode high and the air was sweet and wild outside her window. Elizabeth could not sleep, not with such a night outside and such thoughts within. She gazed up at the monstrous pearl that was the moon and down at the velvet dark that was the grass, and knew she must be out in free air, whatever the cost in scoldings from Mistress Ashley. Quiet as shadow, she slipped from her bedchamber and ran cat-footed through the sleeping house to the garden door.

Midnight embraced her: a safe lover. Safer to dance in night's arms than in Tom Seymour's. Those who guarded her might scold if they caught her barefoot in her shift in night's company, but a scolding was a little thing.

If she were caught so in Tom's — ah, but if only he were here now, would she still tell him 'no' and 'no' again?

I shall never love any man half so well as I love him! It was true; her heart told her so — without telling her whether she loved Thomas Seymour at all. *Go or stay? Love or —?*

Did she dare even dream of the crown, that glittering deadly prize? Her mother had reached for it, and won a

crown and a sword and an arrow-box to be buried in. A crown for Elizabeth meant her brother Ned and her sister Mary dead and buried; did she wish for that?

But Ned is sickly and Mary that and old as well, past thirty now, poor thing, with neither lover nor crown to comfort her. But Elizabeth was healthy and young; she laughed and spun around and made her hair fly wild in the moonlight.

Ned and Mary, and both before Elizabeth. The Act of Succession guaranteed that. But would the Act hold good if Mary became queen? The wet grass was slippery and cold; she stopped her mad dance. Their father had driven Mary's mother to heartbreak and the grave for love of Nan Bullen's black eyes. Would Mary allow Nan Bullen's brat to follow her on the throne?

A risky dream, the crown. But to leave it all behind, to fly away with Tom as he wished —

Or said he wished. How far could Tom Seymour's sweet promises be trusted? As far as the spice-sharp Indies and silk Cathay — or only as far as the Tower, and the block?

Luck was needed to gain either love or the crown; she did not think she could possess both. Love lost you the crown, and your head as well. Two queens' lives told that brief tale.

Grandfather had ridden luck from poverty and exile to become King Henry the Seventh of England; Great-grandmother Elizabeth Woodville had woven luck out of silver-gilt hair and an imitation of virtue to become Edward the Fourth's beloved queen.

My mother had luck, but it did not last, any more than did my father's love for her, or for me, or for anything but his own way. Still, Nan Bullen had been lucky and clever; lucky and clever even at the end. She had been beheaded, not burned.

But I would keep my head! So I suppose I must keep my heart to myself. But oh, Thomas, if only you were here with me now—

She shivered as a cloud crossed the hanging moon. The wind was rising wild and fey, tossing branches back and forth in reckless arcs across the sky. The night suddenly belonged to older, darker dangers than might be met within a man's arms.

Bells rang silver against the night wind, high and sweet; hooves beat against the turf. She knew Mistress Ashley would say she should close her

eyes and say a prayer; she knew that the New Learning said such things did not exist, and hence could not be seen. But she was always contrary and curious; she turned, and looked with her eyes wide open.

The horses were white as milk and moonlight, their riders as dazzling as stars and sin. On the whitest of the pure-white horses sat a lady who wore a gown of grass-green silk and a cloak of white owl feathers. Her shoes were silver; her wind-wild hair was braided with silver bells, as was her horse's silver mane. She was as beautiful as winter's night and summer's day together. Elizabeth stared, and then curtsied, and then crossed herself for good measure.

"Good even, child." The Lady's voice was as pure and inhuman as a mountain stream pouring over smooth stones. She lifted one slender sharp-nailed hand and gestured. "Here we are, my dearest lord — your impartial witness, the first mortal we saw — and you'll never guess who it is."

A dark rider on a dark horse came forward. Darker than the night, he was; his eyes glowed like coals in a dying fire. On his head was a crown of silver branches, or of ivory antlers; it seemed first the one thing, and then the other. "Who? None of your tricks now, do you hear?" The wind rose gale-hard in the trees.

"Of course I hear, darling — they can hear you down to the Dover cliffs."

The wind died down to a soft rustle through spring leaves. The Lady leaned forward and beckoned. "Come here, child. We debate a doctrinal matter and beg your assistance."

Doctrine again, even from Them! Elizabeth was sick of doctrine, and thought all England must be sick of it as well. But she went towards the slim beckoning hand until she stood beside the silk-white steed. The Lady's mount did not smell of hay and horse; it did not smell of anything at all.

"What can this child know of doctrine and debate? Choose again, and stop wasting my time." The dark rider's dark horse shifted, shadow dancing with the night.

"You were the one who set the terms, dear. 'The first mortal we see', I believe you said?"

"Oh, very well — now see here, girl, do you know aught of these damnable new bells?"

Elizabeth thought — she was good at

thinking — and curtsied again. "Only what all know, Your Majesty."

"And what do all know?" The dark king's dark eyes glittered coal-hot.

"Why, that to be in fashion your bells must be cast in iron." *And so must hearts.*

"Clever girl," said the pale Lady. "Your mother was clever too."

Elizabeth caught at the white horse's reins. "Did my mother once speak with you? They say she was a witch — was she?"

The Lady laughed; icicles chiming in the gentle wind. "They say! They will always say, of those who do what they dare not. Witch, and heretic, and whore — so they called her, so they will call you."

"And bastard," said Elizabeth.

"That too."

"My mother —"

"She made a bargain; she did not keep it." The Lady shrugged.

"This is nothing to the point," the Dark Lord said. "Come, girl — we have a wager to decide. Which is stronger, iron bells or bronze?"

Iron bells, or bronze — the Old Religion or the New? Elizabeth had been treading a careful path between those heavy tolling bells since the day her mother died. She knew the answer.

"Why, 'tis simple enough."

"Tell us this simple answer, then, and we'll leave you to your dreams, mortal maiden."

"Not yet. For I know that you give nothing freely; what's good enough for you is good enough for me," Elizabeth the clever; the too-clever-by-half, her brother's Regent said. "What will you give me for the answer you seek?"

The wind crashed through the upper branches again; the pale Lady laughed, and the two sounds rang much alike in Elizabeth's ears. The Lord's eyes flared and sparked. "You dare bargain with us, girl?"

"Yes," said Elizabeth, who'd faced Great Harry down when she was six.

"Now don't get on your high horse, dear. Leave this to me." The Lady smiled down at Elizabeth; the Lady's slanting eyes gleamed, and so did her sharp white teeth. Cat-teeth, shining bright. "So you dare bargain with us, little princess? Come, then, and we will see what terms we can contrive between us. Tell me, what would please you most? A man's heart to toy with in those pretty white hands?"

Elizabeth was vain of her pretty white hands; she was proud of her diamond-

bright mind. She thought, and spoke. "Tell me, what is my answer worth to you?"

"Ah," said the Lady, and her eyes were hooded like a hawk's. "You would deal in earnest, then. But know that you must give more than words if you would earn your heart's desire."

"Yes," said Elizabeth. "I know."

"She wants the crown for her insolent red head, I suppose." Now the Dark Lord smiled; he too had teeth. "Oh, very well —"

"Leave this to me, I said. You're always too hasty, and then you wonder why you're bored." The Lady bent and touched Elizabeth's smooth forehead and the crown shone before her eyes, brilliant as hope, glorious as sun on snow. "Is that your heart's desire, child? To be queen?"

The crown — oh, yes, the crown! It was in her blood, the ruling passion. The crown — easy to get. But could she then keep it on her red head?

"Your heart's desire — think." The Lady's voice was velvet-smooth as country cream, coaxing as a lover's. As coaxing as Thomas Seymour's — "Come, Bess — what would you give?"

"What must I give?"

"I think you know. But few can truly give it up, and none without wishing it undone, in the end. And then they cry for their lost hearts, and curse us for giving them what they swore they must have."

"I would not!"

"Proud princess." Now the Lady's voice tickled the ear like a little viper testing its path. "Your mother was proud too, and wise, for a mortal. But she broke her bargain in the end, and when it was too late. Do you think yourself stronger than she?"

Laughing Nan, dancing her way to the block past all who held out their hands to save her. Heartless Nan, whom great Henry had desired and loved and cursed and killed, and called for at his end.

"Yes," said Elizabeth.

"Think, child. Love is hard to forsake. Are you willing to give your heart and get only a crown? Willing never for all of your mortal days to love? Come, little Bess — choose love instead, and any man you wish will be yours and yours only. The price is less. We will bargain and be gone, and leave you to your lover."

Leave me to my lover — ah, but who loves Bess, and who does Bess love?

Laughing Tom, kissing and caressing his way into her lonely heart. Clever Tom, wooing her active brain as well as her eager body. Ambitious Tom, lured by the gleam of power as other men were by gold. Honeyed words and warm hands and kisses stolen in the dusk — "*Sweet Bess; my heart, my soul, my dearest love* —"

Fickle Tom — yet she had only to say the word, and for all of his life Thomas Seymour would love only Elizabeth...

But there were other men, yes, and women too — the good men and true of England who looked to the future, and prayed it would be better. The people of England who called out her name when she rode by — *Bess, the Lady Elizabeth, our Princess Bessie!* Elizabeth, the princess for neither the Old Religion nor the New.

Elizabeth, for England.

"Come, girl — don't you know your own desires?" A rising restless wind tossed the branches above their heads; the dark rider was growing bored, irritable with delay. "Make up your mind — and don't think a slip of a girl like you can hold us here 'til cockcrow, because you can't."

"Offers made at midnight fade at morning light. Choose now." Implacable, the Lady no longer coaxed; no more would be yielded.

Now Elizabeth faced that thing she most dreaded: a choice with no 'maybe'. She must, at last, say 'yes' or 'no'. And knew, in that shining moment, what her answer must be.

"You may have my heart if you want it — it's no use to me." Her voice rang clear and steady against the night. "But I will not trade it for a crown. I will give you my heart for England, and for luck. Good luck."

"Oh, very well —" the Dark Lord began, and was silenced by a gesture from the Lady. Her upraised hand was a candleflame in the night.

"Luck for yourself, Elizabeth, or luck for England. Choose."

Yea or nay, and a choice harder than the first, and yet no true choice at all. Bess was now, but England was forever.

"England's luck is my luck. For England. Good luck for England, always."

"Done," snapped the Dark Lord. "Now run along, little girl, and when you break the bargain, mind you don't come crying to me!"

"Now see what you've done," said the Lady, inspecting her gleaming

pointed nails. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

The Lord glared at his Lady and his eyes sparked red. He gathered up his horse's reins, and turned away.

"Wait," said Elizabeth. "Don't you want the answer to your riddle of the bells?"

The dark rider turned back upon her. "And what will *that* cost me, mortal maid?"

"Why, that I will give you for thanks, and to seal our bargain," said Elizabeth the wise. "It is simple — both are strong enough to burn flesh from bone and cast men to outer dark. Both are strong

enough to kill. That is all there is."

The Lord turned his horse and rode away in a howling of wind and clashing of tree-limbs overhead. The Lady smiled, and held her moonlight hand out to Elizabeth once more.

"Take this, then, in token of our good faith — and your good luck. And remember what I told you, child — but I doubt that you will." The Lady bent and kissed her; lips stone-cool against Elizabeth's forehead.

Elizabeth held out her hand and took what she was offered. There was sharp pain as she closed her fingers over it; darkness as the moon was cloud-hid-

den.

When the clouds fled away the sky behind was gold and pearl with dawn and Elizabeth stood alone in the quiet garden, her hand wrapped close around a rose red as heart's blood. Long pale thorns bit deep into her flesh; blood dropped ruby-bright from her elegant white fingers.

She watched the blood slide down her slim wrist under the sleeve of her shift. Crimson drops blotched the muslin; Cat Ashley would squall at that. *Well, let her!*

Much later that May-Day morning Mistress Ashley found her wayward royal charge sitting under the rowan tree at the bottom of the garden. "My lady Elizabeth, have you lost your mind? Think of your good name, and mine! If anyone finds out they'll say you've been off with a man, and we all know who! And your good night-rail ruined, and you'll catch your death of cold — why are you holding that nasty thing? Put it down and come in at once!"

"I'm coming."

"Well, hurry on about it — his lordship the Admiral's here to see you, and he can't see you looking like a kitchen-slut!"

"Why not?" said Elizabeth. "He'd like it."

"Elizabeth!"

"Oh, don't fuss, Cat. It doesn't matter." She looked at what had once, at dawning, been a red rose in her hand. The rose had vanished; the thorns had not. She considered the matter carefully and then threw the thorn-branch away. She was not her mother; she would not forget.

She knew now how she would answer Thomas Seymour, when next he asked her to marry him, and tried to kiss her under the blossoming cherry-tree. Not yea, not nay, but may, and may-be. And if it broke his heart, as he swore it would — well, it would not break hers.

Elizabeth of England no longer had a heart to break.

Against all odds given and taken at the Faerie Court, Elizabeth of England kept her side of the bargain through life and death. Oberon perforce kept his, and eventually came to take a certain perverse pride in honoring the pact that could have no end.

Which did not in the least prevent him from blaming the entire Matter of Britain on Titania's meddling.



Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

"Well, I hope you're satisfied! Who-ever heard of a woman who didn't want her heart back?"

"You have, now, dear," Titania sweetly informed him.

Oberon's last chance for freedom from the bargain the fourteen-year-old Bess had struck that long-ago May Eve had been lost on Gloriana's deathbed. For Elizabeth Tudor's last words had not been a call for Tom Seymour, or her Bonny Sweet Robin, or even for the egregious Essex, but a round oath. "Little man, little man, *must* is not a word to be used to princes!"

Which meant that Oberon — prince or no — *must* honor his side of the bargain. For-ever. Which was, as he frequently informed his wife, really A Bit Much.

"But I've done it. I've kept *my* word — I think even you'll admit that? Yes, I thought you'd have to! That iron-headed Cromwell was bad enough — and you'll admit I trumped that Puritan ace pretty neatly? I thought so!"

His wife, prudent for once, said nothing; silent yet eloquent, she buffed her elegantly curved claws with a piece of scarlet silk.

"As for the howling pack of princes they've got now — well, any pretty ankle will do for *them*." Oberon paused for breath, inhaling like a bull about to charge before commencing a verbal assault on every sensitive ear within two spheres. "But *this!*" he bel-lowed. "What am I supposed to do about this Corsican madman? You tell me what I'm to do, eh? He's already overrun half Europe —"

"I know, dear," Titania told him. "Everyone knows."

"— and I tell you frankly, Titania, that I don't see what's to stop him crossing the Channel and reenacting the Conquest."

"If he does, you'll have to pay forfeit,

you know — unless you're going to argue that a successful French invasion would be a good thing for the English. And I'm not at all sure," Titania continued, "that you'd win your case."

"May I remind you, madam, that this is all your fault in the first place?"

"No you may not. For one thing, it's not true in the least. For another, it's a waste of time. For a third, you know perfectly well what you're going to have to do. You just don't want to admit it."

Oberon glowered at her, which im-

didn't mean it and was only thinking of how good *Rex quondam Rexque futurus* would look on his tombstone."

And so Arthur woke to take England's part once more. And England's luck held as strong as Elizabeth Tudor's will.

Always.

*

INDIA EDGHILL's interest in fantasy can be blamed squarely on her father, who read her **THE WIZARD OF OZ, THE FIVE CHILDREN AND IT**, and

ALF'S BUT-TON before she was old enough to object. Later she discovered Andrew Lang's multi-colored fairy books, Edward Eager, and the fact that Persian cats make the best paper-weights. She and her cats own too many books on far too many subjects. She is the sister of famed romance writer Rosemary Edghill (who writes science fiction — and has been published in these pages — as *eluki bes shahar*).

VINCENT DI FATE worked in animated films before turning to freelance art-work. He received a Hugo as Best Professional Artist in

1979 as well as the Skylark and the Lensman Awards. He is regarded as one of the world's major illustrators of futuristic themes, including astronomical and aerospace themes for the National Geographic Society, CBS television, and NASA. Workman published **DiFATE'S CATALOG OF SCIENCE FICTION HARDWARE** in 1980. He is a past president of ASFA and was the Artist Guest of Honor at the 1992 Worldcon.



pressed Titania as much as such gestures ever did. "Oh, very well, I suppose you're right —"

"You know I'm right, dear."

Oberon ignored this and waved to a passing nymph. "You, there — go get me Roland's horn. And don't take all midnight about it." Turning back to his wife, he went on, "— and I hope you're satisfied. He's not going to like it."

"He's the one who said 'call me if I'm needed'. It's hardly your fault if he

The Results of the Cauldron

Stories:

- ◆ 1st Place: **"Thimbleful of Magic"**
by **Carrie Martin**
- ◆ 2nd Place: **"The Thin Man"**
by **Steven Piziks**
- ◆ 3rd Place: **"Hillbilly Charm"**
by **Dan Guynn**

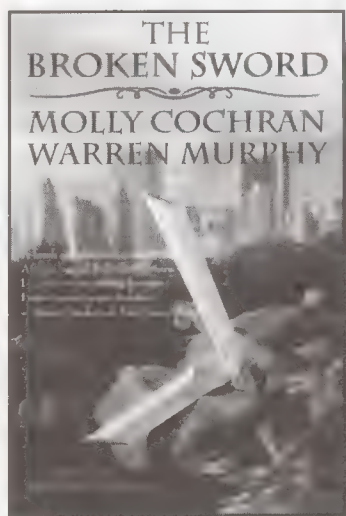
Artwork:

- ◆ 1st Place: **George Barr**
for **"The Thin Man"**
- ◆ 2nd Place: **Lori Dietrick**
for **"Little Things"**
- ◆ 3rd Place: **George Barr**
for **"The Three Tasks"**

Some reader comments from the ballots: "I used to think 'The Practical Princess' was the clever story, but Ms. Chye's 'Three Tasks' has topped it. Please tell her, 'Great work!'" Another said of "Hillbilly Charm": "liked the old lady!" One reader told us that "Thimbleful of Magic" was "one of the best workings of traditional folk material I've read in a long time!" We apologize to one reader who complained sadly of the title story: "This gave me nightmares." (Other people did like the story, it seems.)

Congratulations to all the winners! To vote for your favorites in *this* issue, use the ballot on page 64.

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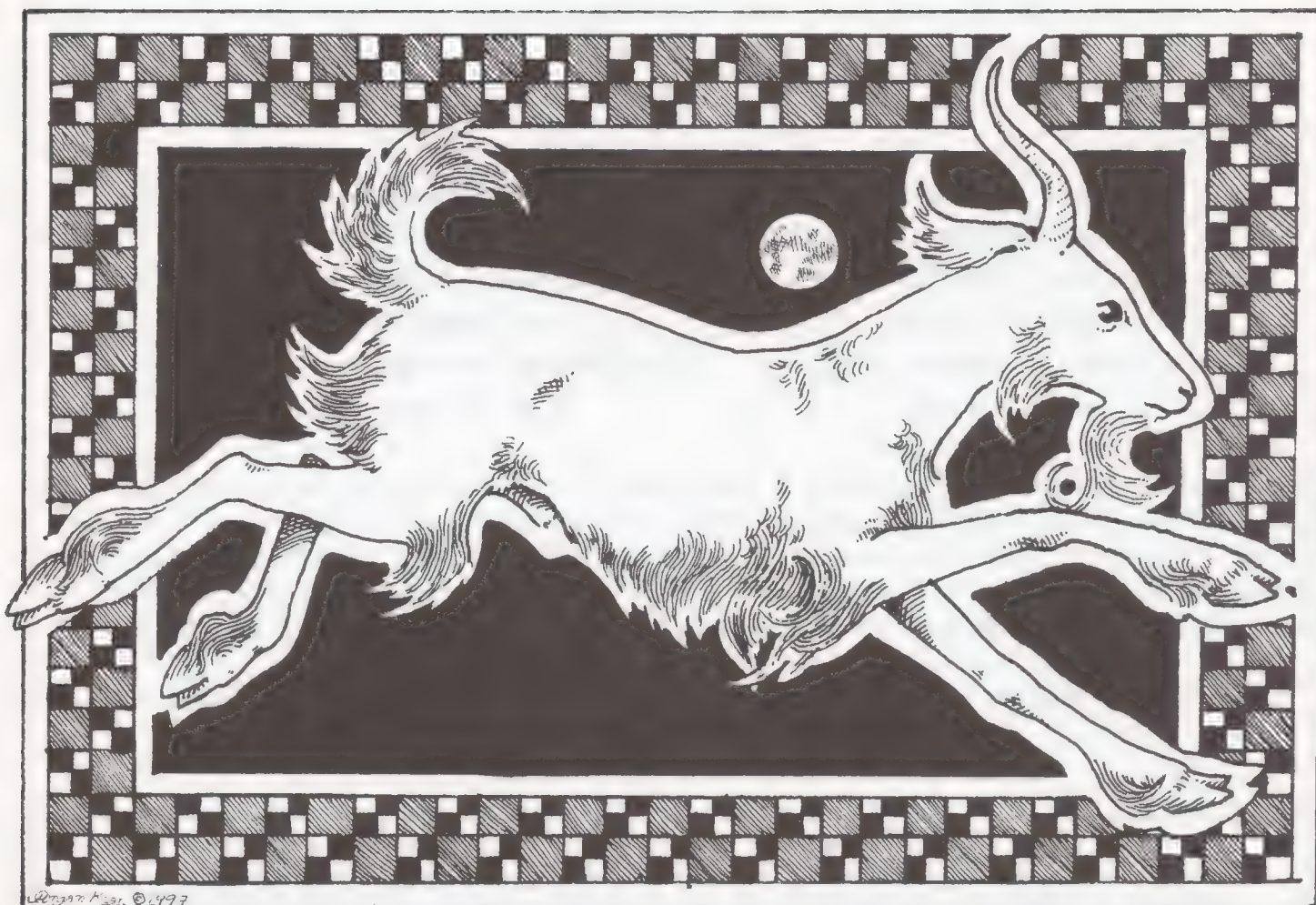
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Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

The Rose, the Rich Man, and Mother Berchte

The jingling stopped and heavy pounding shook the cottage. Gretchen squeaked with fright and dodged behind Mami's skirts while Papi went to answer the door. Karsten, Gretchen's older brother, stood next to the stove trying to look brave. Hoder, her younger brother, stuck his fingers in his mouth and wriggled on old Oma's lap. He was too little to know what Mother Night was about.

Gretchen's heart was going bumpity-bump and she didn't know whether she wished Papi would open the door quick or slam down the bar to keep it

firmly shut. She was a sturdy child, with red braids Mami had coiled special just above her ears for the Mother Night celebration. Mami's skirts were rough between her strong little fingers, but they wouldn't save her from Mother Berchte.

Papi took a deep breath and opened the door. Snow swirled into the room, making the candle flames dance like little ghosts, and Mother Berchte stomped into the cottage, muttering and complaining under her breath. Gretchen swallowed hard. Mother Berchte was tall, taller than Papi, and

she had horns on her head and fangs in her mouth and claws on her fingertips. A tail dragged the ground behind her and she carried a sack flung over one shoulder. She smelled like smoke and old meat. Behind her stood a huge white goat, the biggest Gretchen had ever seen. It was as big as Papi's plowhorse, and it followed Mother Berchte into the house with a clattering of hooves and a jingling of bells.

"Good evening, Mother," Papi said respectfully. He closed the door. "Enter and welcome."

The goat sank to its knees in the cor-

by Steven Piziks

ner closest to the stove and Mother Berchte glared angrily about the room. Gretchen hid her face in the folds of Mami's skirt, but eventually she couldn't bear it any longer and peeped cautiously around to look.

Mother Berchte was staring right at her.

Gretchen tried to hide her eyes again, but found she couldn't. Mother Berchte's glittering black eyes held hers for long time, and Gretchen almost stopped breathing, she was so frightened. Was Mother Berchte going to stuff her into the sack and take her away? That's what happened to Katja last year. No one had seen her since.

Then Mother Berchte grinned a wicked grin and opened her sack. "All right, then — gather around."

Gretchen let her breath out with a *whoosh*. Once Mother Berchte told you to gather around, it was safe. That's what Papi said. It didn't matter if you were good or bad or hiding in bed. If Mother Berchte took a child, there was nothing anyone could do about it.

Gretchen let Mami nudge her forward as Mother Berchte began pulling brightly-wrapped presents from her sack. Gretchen quickly forgot her fear as she unwrapped a new rag doll — how had Mother Berchte known her old one had fallen into the well? — and a new dress and new shoes and new mittens. Karsten got a shirt and leggings and boots and mittens and — best of all — a real, sharp-bladed knife that caught the firelight and made it glitter. Karsten's eyes shone with pride as he strapped it to his belt and strutted importantly around the cottage. Gretchen felt a surge of jealousy and Mother Berchte opened her sack again.

"All right, then — gather around."

Gretchen's eyes grew round, jealousy quickly forgotten, as Mother Berchte handed out food. Sweet little cakes and decorated cookies and red apples and purple plums and — oh my — even strawberries. Everyone, including Oma, thanked Mother Berchte nicely, and Gretchen, remembering her manners, did not gobble up every strawberry Mother Berchte laid on the table, but instead offered to share with Oma and little Hoder.

Mother Berchte, meanwhile, pulled a large cauldron out of her sack, drew her knife, and turned to the goat. "Nassirskaegi!" she spat. "Come here, you old goat!"

Nassirskaegi, forgotten in his corner

by the stove, slowly rose to his feet and clattered across the floor to Mother Berchte. A hush fell over the room and Gretchen paused with the last strawberry halfway to her mouth. She had heard stories about this, but she had never seen it. She threw a quick glance at Oma, who winked, and that made Gretchen feel better as Mother Berchte yanked Nassirskaegi's head back by one horn and, with a swift slash of her knife, cut Nassirskaegi's throat.

Blood ran into the cauldron at Mother Berchte's feet and Nassirskaegi collapsed without a sound. In no time at all, Mother Berchte had him skinned and butchered. Gretchen couldn't believe her eyes. Not even Papi, who butchered pigs every fall for the neighbors, could work so fast. An impossibly short time later, the cottage was filled with the thick, savory smell of goat stew. Gretchen felt rather sorry for poor Nassirskaegi, but hadn't Papi always told her that animals were meant to be eaten?

Mother Berchte, meanwhile, dropped a ladle into the cauldron, which sat in the middle of the floor. No fire heated it, and Gretchen hadn't seen Mother Berchte empty out the blood, but it was undeniably full of bubbling stew.

"Eat all you like," Mother Berchte commanded, "and throw the bones in my sack. But break *none*."

Gretchen took up her little bowl and quietly got in line as Mother Berchte dished up stew for Oma, Papi, Mami, and Karsten. Hoder had been put to bed.

"Thank you," Gretchen whispered when Mother Berchte filled her bowl, but Mother Berchte only grunted in reply. Gretchen decided that Mother Berchte didn't have very nice manners, even if she did bring presents.

Everyone took their places around the table, Oma said a quick blessing, and Gretchen took a cautious bite of stew. It tasted every bit as delicious as it smelled — thick and meaty without too many icky vegetables. There was soft, hot bread from Mother Berchte's sack along with apple juice so cold it made Gretchen's head ache. Mother Berchte gave Mami, Papi, and Oma rich, dark beer, and Papi seemed to be drinking an awful lot of it. Gretchen wondered why.

Karsten smiled at her from his seat next to her on the bench. He was eating with his new knife. Mother Berchte sat at the head of the table where Oma

usually sat, but she didn't eat or speak. Instead, whenever someone picked a bone out of the stew, she held up her sack. Bones flew steadily across the table, each landing neatly in the sack, even when Gretchen threw them.

In between tosses, Gretchen snuck glances at Mother Berchte. She visited five or six houses in the village every year on Mother Night, but this was the first time she had visited Gretchen's house. Gretchen could see why people were afraid of her — she was frighteningly ugly — but the only bad thing she had done so far was butcher Nassirskaegi, and even gentle Papi did things like *that*. And the longer Gretchen looked at Mother Berchte, the less ugly she seemed. There was strength and power in her when she moved, and Gretchen was willing to bet she wasn't afraid of *anything*, not even the monster under Gretchen's bed. Mother Berchte, Gretchen decided, could probably have the monster under the bed for lunch.

Eventually, every bit of stew had been eaten and Gretchen was so full she felt ready to explode. All Nassirskaegi's bones were in Mother Berchte's sack. Mother Berchte took up the sack and Gretchen held her breath. She could feel everyone else in the room doing the same thing. Karsten was clutching the hilt of his knife with white fingers.

Mother Berchte gave the sack a rough shake. "Come on, you old goat!"

The sack exploded open and Nassirskaegi popped into the room, completely alive. There was no sign that he had just been butchered and eaten. Gretchen squealed and applauded. Even Oma looked amazed, and Gretchen knew Mother Berchte had visited Oma's house many times when Mami was a girl.

"Spring is coming," Mother Berchte said in her harsh voice. "It's always on its way."

And with that, she towed Nassirskaegi out the cottage, jumped onto his back, and rode into the dark, snowy night as Mami and Papi heaved heavy sighs that seemed to come all the way down from their toes.

A while later, Gretchen was tucked into her little bed with her new doll beside her and Karsten in the next bed over.

"Mami," she asked, "why did Mother Berchte tell us that spring is coming? Everyone knows it is."

Mami tucked a strand of brown hair

back into the braids twisted around her head. Gretchen wondered what it would be like to have brown hair. Her hair was red, like Papi's.

"Mother Berchte says that because this is the longest, coldest night of the year," Mami explained, "and sometimes it's hard to remember that spring will eventually get here. That's why Mother Berchte brings us fresh food and drink."

"But why does she do it?" Gretchen persisted. "Why?"

Mami chuckled. "I can see the only way to get you to sleep is to tell you Mother Berchte's story."

Karsten sat up in his bed and Gretchen caught sight of his new knife, hidden under his pillow. "Tell us, Mami. Please?"

"I'll tell you," Mami said, "but you have to promise to go right to sleep afterwards."

"We promise," Gretchen said quickly, and Mami smiled again.

A very long time ago, *Mami began*, Mother Berchte didn't come to visit on Mother Night. She came to visit anytime she pleased. In fact, she made her home above this very village in a cave at the top of Mother's Mountain.

"So that's why it's called Mother's Mountain," Karsten said.

"Shhh!" Gretchen said. "*Mami's telling a story.*"

Every so often, *Mami continued*, Mother Berchte would decide it was time to go visiting. She took up her sack, strapped on her great iron shoes, and went smashing and crashing her way down the mountain, kicking up sparks as big as your head, until she got to our village at the bottom. When she arrived, the streets were always empty, of course, because people were afraid of her. They shut their doors and locked their windows, hoping Mother Berchte wouldn't choose their house this time.

Mother Berchte stomped through the village with her sack over her shoulder until she found a likely cottage. Then she picked a window and stared and glared through the glass until the people inside gave her food and gifts to make her go away.

"She took presents instead of giving them?" Gretchen asked, amazed.

"Shhh!" Karsten said. "*Mami's telling a story.*"

Things went on like this for many years until one day, a rich man moved

into the village. No one knows why he decided to move here, but the first thing he did when he arrived was build a great big house with a great big wall that went all the way around it.

The rich man wasn't a very good neighbor — he never invited anyone over to his house and he insisted that everyone call him "my lord", even though he wasn't a noble. He was a short, pudgy man with dark hair and greedy, glittering eyes.

Now the reason this rich man built a wall all the way around his house was that he was a gardener. He was the best gardener in the entire world, in fact, and his garden was a place of wonders. He grew daffodils and bell-lilies and tulips and lilacs and even rare golden-rod. His flowers always bloomed with the brightest of scarlets and golds and greens and purples and they smelled so wonderful, the bees themselves fought over which would be the first to sip their sweet nectar.

But the rich man was jealous, and he didn't want to share his garden with anyone else. He was afraid that someone would steal his secrets, and that's why he built the wall around his house.

One day on the top of her mountain, Mother Berchte realized she hadn't gone visiting in quite a while, so she took up her sack, strapped on her great iron shoes, and went smashing and crashing her way down the mountain, kicking up sparks as big as your head, until she got to our village at the bottom. The first thing she noticed, of course, was the rich man's house, and, like any good neighbor, she decided to pay him a visit.

A locked gate around back kept most visitors away, but Mother Berchte knew it was meant for other people, not her. She smashed her way into the rich man's yard to see what she could see.

When she came around the corner, she found the rich man on his knees weeding a rosebush, and she nodded to herself. This was the proper position for someone to greet her.

The rich man looked up. Because of the wall around his house, he hadn't seen Mother Berchte's sparks or heard the smashing and crashing of iron on stone, and because he never spoke to his neighbors, no one had told him who Mother Berchte was. And although Mother Berchte is frighteningly ugly, all the rich man could see was that she had crushed an entire bed of freshly-planted marigolds, and he became in-

stantly furious.

"What are you doing here?" he snapped. "How dare you barge into my garden like this?"

Mother Berchte blinked at him in surprise. No one had ever spoken to her like that before.

"I am Mother Berchte," she growled.

"I don't care who you are, you senile old hag," the rich man barked. "Get out of my garden before I throw you out!"

Mother Berchte began to get a bit annoyed. She decided someone needed to teach this man a lesson, and that someone would be her.

"You call this a garden?" she mocked.

"Pah! This is a tangle of weeds. Now my garden, my garden is perfect. Yours is nothing, little man. Nothing at all." And she squashed a patch of violets to prove her point.

The rich man leaped to his feet, face red, eyes bulging from their sockets. "You're as stupid as you are ugly, old hag. My garden is the finest in the country. In the world!"

Mother Berchte laughed. "Well then, little man, why don't we make a bet? I'll bet you that my garden is better than yours. If you win, I'll be your servant for a year and a day. But if I have the better garden, you serve me for a year and day. What do you say?"

"Who will judge?" the rich man asked shrewdly.

"You."

It was the rich man's turn to laugh. The hag couldn't be serious. Not only was it impossible for anyone in the world to have a better garden than his, he certainly wouldn't admit it if they did. He would get a free servant out of it, and while she wasn't much to look at, she was obviously strong and would doubtless be useful. He could hitch a plow to her and save his horses in the spring. Perhaps he would even use a whip. Yes, that would be very nice.

"Very well," the rich man said. "You have a bet. May I see your garden?"

"Not today," Mother Berchte replied. "If you want to see my garden, be at the top of my mountain at sundown on Mother Night, the longest night of the year. Agreed?"

The rich man couldn't believe his luck. No winter garden could possibly compare with his in summer. The hag must be mad.

"Agreed," he said.

Mother Berchte grinned a horrible grin and left, taking care to crush a few dozen tulips on her way out.

Well, summer passed into autumn, and autumn passed into winter until finally Mother Night, the longest night of the year, arrived. The rich man put on his warmest cloak and climbed carefully up the mountain as the sun slipped toward the horizon. The snow was deeper than the rich man thought it would be, however, and the sun had already set by the time he reached the top, where Mother Berchte was waiting for him.

"You're late," she hissed. "Quickly, we don't have much time."

She all but dragged the rich man into the forest just as the last streaks of light faded from the western sky.

"Well?" the rich man asked impatiently, shivering in his cloak. "Where's this wonderful garden of yours?"

"Wait," Mother Berchte growled.

The rich man waited in the dark forest for a long time. He was about say something to Mother Berchte when he noticed something strange. The cold, cutting wind had become a warm, soothing breeze. The snow melted quickly away, revealing growing grass

as if someone were whisking a white sheet off a green blanket. And then the sun rose.

The trees shook themselves and put out thick emerald leaves. Flowers and blossoms appeared like magic on the ground. Daisies and violets and lilacs and roses spread across the forest floor, perfuming the air with wonderful sweetness.

And then animals appeared. Rabbits and deer and skunks and squirrels, all with young ones scampering and playing between their feet. Birds which had



Organ-Kean 1997

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

flown south long ago trilled and sang in the trees, filling the very air with beautiful music.

It was an amazing sight, breathtaking in its beauty, and the rich man couldn't do anything but stand and stare. This was Nature itself, and nothing, not even the rich man's garden, could be more perfect. The rich man also knew that here, in this perfect place, he could never do anything so imperfect as tell a lie.

"Well?" Mother Berchte asked. "Whose garden is better — yours or mine?"

The rich man ground his teeth. The rich man stamped his feet. But eventually he was forced to say it.

"Yours," he muttered. "Your garden is better."

Mother Berchte laughed her terrible laugh and slapped the rich man across the shoulders, making him stagger. "Then I have a servant."

"Please," the rich man whined, trying to get his balance. "I have obligations, matters to attend. If I disappear, I'll be ruined forever. Please — give me twelve months to make arrangements, then I'll return and —" he clenched his fists — "serve you for a year and a day."

It was on the tip of Mother Berchte's tongue to refuse — perhaps it would have been best if she had — but she was in an unexpectedly charitable mood. She had just won a bet and humiliated the idiotic human who had dared to insult her. Perhaps she could afford to be generous.

"Very well," Mother Berchte growled. "Return to the mountain at sundown in one year to begin your service. But remember that I'll work you all the harder for it. I have matters of my own to attend to, so enjoy the garden. I'll be back."

And Mother Berchte left. The rich man tugged at his collar beneath the sun's heat and looked around at Mother Berchte's beautiful mountain.

The more he looked, the more he

began to hate it.

It was better, more beautiful, than his garden, and it always would be. Jealousy consumed his heart and suddenly he wanted to destroy the garden, find some way to make it less than perfect. But even as the idea crossed his mind, the sun began to set. The wind grew chill, the birds flew away, and the leaves fell from the trees.

The rich man rushed to a patch of violets, intent on trampling them, but they withered away and vanished beneath his boots. He snatched at a clump of daisies, but they too dried up and disappeared. Snow and darkness were falling, and the rich man cast desperately about for something, anything. Then his eye lit upon a rosebush still in bloom. He dove for it, ignoring the thorns that bit his hands, and he tore at the blossoms even as they shriveled away. The rosebush became nothing more than a dead-looking clump of thorny vines, but the rich man noticed a single seed stuck in the blood on his palm. He stuffed the seed into his pocket just as Mother Berchte returned.

"And that was my garden," she said. "You may leave now. Just remember to return at sundown in one year. Don't. Be. Late."

The rich man nodded to her and without a word made his way down the mountain, pausing every so often to feel the hard seed in his pocket. And when winter passed and spring arrived, the first thing he did was plant that seed in his garden. But that year, nothing grew on the rich man's grounds. Not a single daffodil or daisy, not one tiny tulip. Nothing.

Well, spring passed into summer, summer passed into autumn, and autumn passed into winter, and that winter was the worst anyone could remember. Horrible howling winds tore down the mountainside, bringing avalanches of snow with them until the village was all but buried and the people shivered in their homes.

Finally Mother Night arrived and once again the rich man, who had put all his affairs in order, got out his warmest cloak. He closed up his house and, clutching his cloak about him, climbed up the mountain to serve Mother Berchte. But the snow was so deep, he didn't arrive this time until well after sunset, and Mother Berchte was waiting for him outside her cave.

"You!" she bellowed angrily over the wind. "You did this, didn't you? This is

your fault!"

The rich man took a step back. The cold wind bit into his face and hands. "What do you mean? What's my fault?"

"Are you blind, man?" Mother Berchte cried. "Take a look around you! What do you see?"

The rich man looked, but all he could see was a dark mountain covered with bare trees and snow. What was she talking about?

Then it came to him.

"It's not here," the rich man said. "There's no garden."

Mother Berchte reached out with one clawed hand and pulled the rich man so close he could smell her warm, sour breath.

"You took something, didn't you?" she hissed. "You destroyed the garden's perfection."

Fear gripped the rich man's stomach for a moment, but only a moment. It was replaced by anger — anger and pride.

"Yes!" he sneered. "Yes, I did! Your precious garden is no more, and that means mine is the best. So go ahead and kill me. I'd rather die than serve a filthy old hag like you."

Wind howled around them, driving stinging snow into the rich man's face, but Mother Berchte didn't seem to notice. She released the rich man so quickly he almost fell.

"You stupid, stupid man," Mother Berchte cried. "Did you think my garden was just there to be pretty? It was a reminder to everyone that no matter how dark and cold and long winter might be, spring is coming. They might not be able to see the garden, but they knew it was there, inside. And now it no longer exists. You've destroyed their hope. People will wither and die because what you did."

"What do I care about the hopes of the poor?" The rich man gathered his cloak more tightly around him. "Just kill me, if that's what you're going to do."

"You still don't understand, do you?" Mother Berchte drew herself up and wind suddenly hushed, leaving tense silence behind. "If the garden doesn't exist, something else will have to take its place."

And with blinding speed, Mother Berchte smashed the rich man across the face. The blow drove him to his knees, and the moment he touched the snow, he began to change. Long white hair sprouted from his back. His hands

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and feet hardened and split into cloven hooves. Horns spiraled out of his forehead. In moments, standing on the mountainside was not a rich man, but a great white goat as big as a horse.

"Your name," Mother Berchte hissed, "is Nassirskaegi. Now come!"

And Mother Berchte rode Nassirskaegi down the mountain to the village, where she pounded on the first door she came upon. When the startled people opened it, Mother Berchte shoved her way inside.

You know the rest. Mother Berchte opened her sack to hand out presents and she opened her sack to hand out food. Then she cut Nassirskaegi's throat so everyone could eat him and throw the bones into her sack, and when the sack was full, Mother Berchte shook it, and Nassirskaegi burst back out, brought back to life again to remind us that out of death comes life, and that no matter how dark and cold and long winter might be, spring is coming. It's always on its way.

The story, however, doesn't end there. Mother Berchte and Nassirskaegi visited many houses that first night, and they have visited many other houses since, but there's one house they have never visited. They never went near the rich man's house. And that was too bad, for if they had, they would have seen a drift in the garden stir, and they might have watched a single, blood-red rose push its way up through the snow to bloom all night long. And when the sun came up, they may have seen the rose wither away until nothing was left but a single seed, caught by the wind and blown into the forest.

I'm told that if you're in the right place at the right time on Mother Night, you might also see the drifts stir and watch a single blood-red rose bloom on the white snow until sunrise, also reminding us that no matter how dark and cold and long winter might be, spring is always on its way.

"But Mami," Gretchen protested, "doesn't that mean Mother Berchte doesn't have to kill Nassirskaegi every year? Doesn't she know about the rose? She knew my doll fell down the well."

Mami sighed and kissed Gretchen on the forehead. "I've thought about that, too, sweetie, and I think that's the worst part of the story."

"What's that, Mami?" Karsten asked.

"I think," Mami said sadly, "that Mother Berchte knows about the rose,

but Nassirskaegi does not."

Mami kissed Gretchen again and tucked the covers more firmly around her, but Gretchen was still shivering when she fell asleep.

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STEVEN PIZIKS teaches English and writing, and this is his fourth sale to MZBFM. He writes, "I still have to work out storylines on my feet, so I get my writing and my exercise done at the same time. I'm trying to market one science fiction novel while working on the final draft of another. 'Mother Berchte' is a story I often tell orally, and I finally decided to try it in written form. This version is based on the leg-

end behind the German Christmas song 'Es Ist Ein Ros' Entsprungen'. I would like to dedicate this story to Steven Wise of Minneapolis, who first introduced me to Mother Berchte. My life hasn't been the same since." Steven lives near Ann Arbor, Michigan, with his wife Kala.

MARGARET ORGAN-KEAN works as a tech writer and systems analyst in addition to her artwork assignments from *Cricket*, *MZBFM*, and *Wizards of the Coast* (where she illustrated cards in the *MAGIC* deck, and was the artist and designer for all cards in *The Great Dalmuti*). She is also the West Coast rep for ASFA, the artists' organization.



Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean



Artwork by George Barr

Der Ring des Nibelungen

by Russell William Asplund

Jonathan Wilkes was five hours into a fourteen-hour marathon performance of Wagner's Ring Cycle when he realized that he didn't really like opera. In fact, he had only been watching for the last hour or so in the hope that one of the singers would cough up a lung. He was cheering for Sieglinde, Hunding's rather corpulent wife, but he would settle for any of them. It seemed inevitable — no one should be able to sing that loud, that long without some kind of damage, and the show was just getting started.

The sets were impressive, though; he had to give them that. Hunding's hall stretched up farther than he could see, with rustic wood and rough-hewn beams that would have made redwoods look like Lincoln Logs. A great fire roared in the fireplace, not the usual stage fire of cellophane and lights, but a real, roaring fire that would crack occasionally, sending out bright showers of sparks. Outside the windows the storm raged convincingly, and whenever someone threw the great doors open Jonathan could almost swear he smelled the fresh, ozone scent of falling rain.

Still, none of that made up for the fact that very little was happening onstage. Siegmund's story was tragic enough, his passion for Sieglinde compelling, and the conflict with Hunding was bound to turn into something, but so far nothing much had happened but meaningful looks and pregnant pauses. And judging from the past five hours, there wasn't much hope anything else would happen soon.

He looked around the crowded theater. Nearly every seat was full, everyone staring with rapt attention at the stage. He looked back up at the stage to see what he was missing. Siegmund was bemoaning his lack of a weapon, while not six feet away the hilt of an impressive looking broadsword stuck out of the room's central pillar. It was all Jonathan could do to keep from standing up and shouting, "Look behind you, you Norse moron!"

"You'd think he'd see it there, wouldn't you?" the man beside him whispered, as if reading his thoughts. Jonathan jumped at the sound of the voice so near. "Why do you think he doesn't notice?"

"Why? Because it's not in the script,

that's why." Jonathan struggled to keep his voice low and still be heard over Siegmund's lamentations.

"A profound answer," the man said, turning his attention back to the stage. Jonathan began to wonder why he hadn't noticed him before. The man was huge, with broad shoulders and a chest that threatened to bump into the seat in front of him. His blond hair was short and swept back, almost military in style, and his dark suit looked ready to burst in several places. Jonathan was sure he would have noticed him coming in, but perhaps he had already been in his seat. Somehow Jonathan couldn't remember. He shrugged and tried to get back to what was onstage. He couldn't leave gracefully before the next intermission anyway; he might as well try to enjoy the show.

Sieglinde finally came in and told Siegmund about the sword, virtually putting his hand right on it before he seemed to catch on. Jonathan settled in for some action as the Nordic hero grabbed the sword, a song of revenge roaring from his throat. But the song of revenge turned into a song of love, and then somehow transformed into an ode

to spring. Jonathan sighed deeply and stole a glance at the man beside him. The man was staring at the stage with a look of deep longing, and Jonathan could have sworn he saw a tear in the big man's eye.

"Even a warrior's heart must take time for beauty." Jonathan turned at the sound of a deep voice behind him. This man wore sunglasses, even in the darkened theater, and his suit was black, even down to the tie. Jonathan might have suspected he was blind if it were not for the almost physical pressure of his gaze.

Jonathan shrugged. "I guess so, it's just...." He trailed off, not sure exactly what it was he wanted to say and unsure why he should want to tell the stranger.

"Your heart still yearns for battle; that is good," the man behind him said. "Do not worry, it will come."

"Right, thanks." Jonathan turned back to the stage. For an opera crowd things were getting a little too talkative. At least he'd always thought of opera crowds as quiet, though he couldn't remember ever actually going to an opera before.

Siegmund finally grabbed the sword, and, catching Sieglinde up in his arm — that in itself no small feat of strength — crashed through the doors and out into the night. Again Jonathan was stunned at the care taken with the sets. The forest beyond the doors seemed to stretch forever. Someone had gone to great lengths, perhaps unreasonable lengths, to make everything look just right. He had to admire the effort, although it seemed like overkill.

The act ended and the lights on the stage dimmed while those on the audience were brought up. No one moved for the exits, and Jonathan looked around nervously. He tried to remember what he had done during the last intermission, or even the break between the end of *Das Rheingold* and the start of *Die Walküre*. He was sure there had to have been breaks, but he couldn't remember ever leaving the theater. He felt crowded, hemmed in by the large man to his right and the dark weight of the man behind him. There was no rising tide of conversation from the audience, just the sigh of breathing and an occasional cough.

"So, come here often?" This time the man seated on his left spoke. He was a wiry man, with long, bright red hair and a grin that was somehow even less

comforting than the cold consideration of the man behind him.

"Well, no. I'm not really much of an opera fan..." Jonathan struggled to stammer out an answer. He realized that he couldn't clearly remember having decided to attend the opera. When he tried to think about how he had gotten there, a cold pit seemed to loom in his mind, one that he was loath to get close to.

A dark arm shot from the row behind him to land on the arm of his red-haired neighbor. "What are you doing here?" The anger in the dark man's voice was barely controlled.

"I have a ticket, like everyone else." The redhead's smile grew wider and more predatory as he showed his ticket to the man in black.

"I thought we had made it clear you were not welcome."

"I have a ticket." The redhead swept the other man's arm away angrily, his smile fading to a sneer. "You know the rules."

"You've never been one to bother with rules."

"Yes, but you are and that's the point, isn't it?" He turned pointedly toward Jonathan. "So, have you seen anybody here you know?"

"Silence." The dark man spoke quietly, but the force behind the words was impossible to ignore.

The redhead spun around, the veneer of friendliness gone completely. "If you don't like it go find another seat. There's nothing you can do to...."

"Silence." The dark man did not even raise his voice, but it stopped the redhead mid-bluster. It was like the sound between a flash of lightning and the crack of thunder. He held the man's gaze for one long, uncomfortable moment. "The opera is starting."

The lights dropped as he spoke and Jonathan turned back toward the stage, relieved to be out of the crossfire. If the intermission seemed shorter than it should, that was the least of his worries. The redhead's questions had troubled him deeply. What was he doing here? Today was a work day, he should be preparing his presentation to the board, not wasting his time at an opera. At least he thought he should.

The curtains rose on a craggy mountain, all rocks and shadow. The storm still raged, letting in only dim light and the occasional flash of lightning. A horn sounded in the distance, causing something to stir within Jonathan that he

couldn't put a name to, like the feeling he got when he closed a deal, or finished a presentation knowing that he had the audience eating out of his hand. The questions faded into the back of his mind as a dark-cloaked figure walked onto the stage.

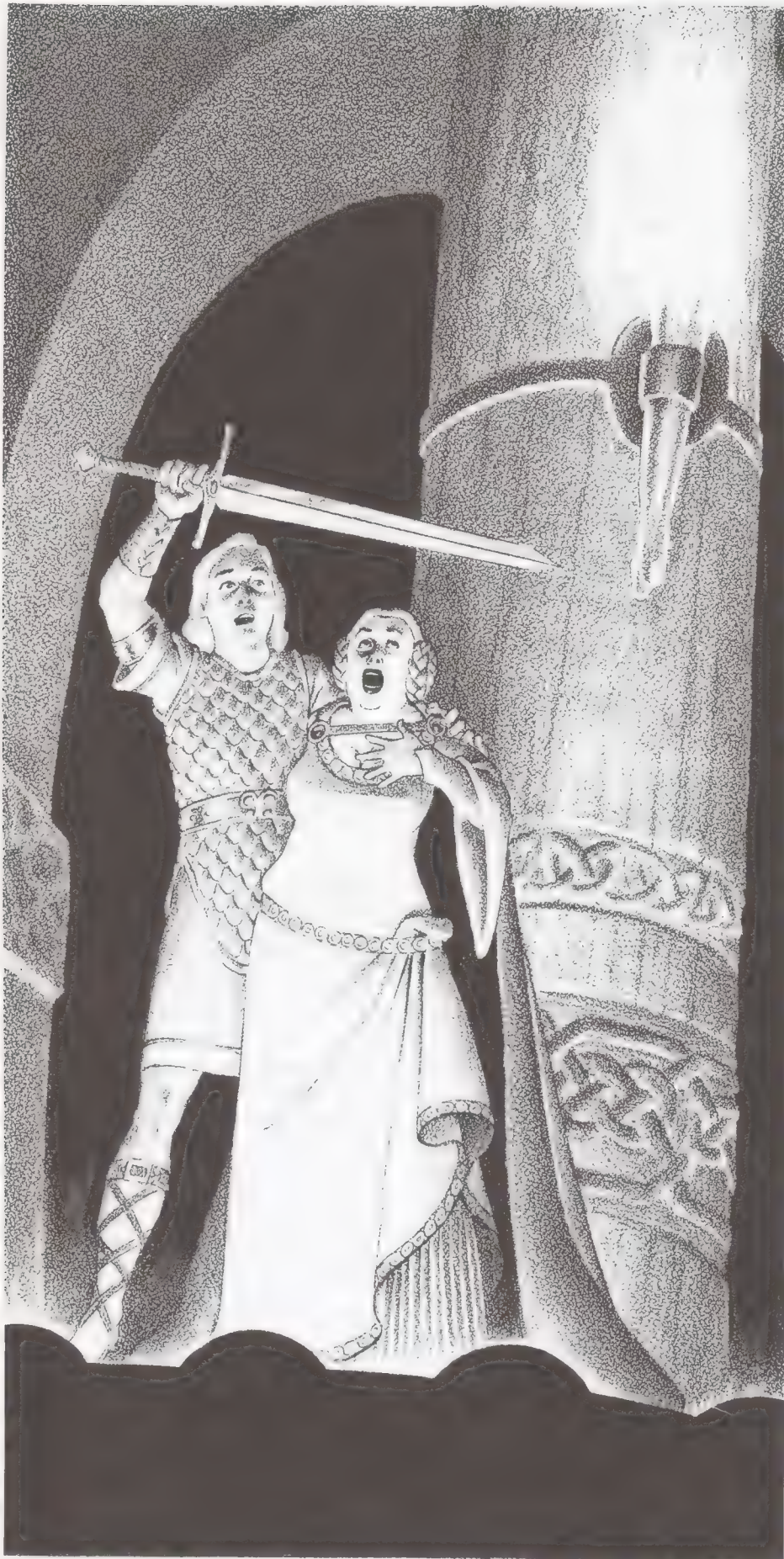
The dark figure turned to face the audience, one eye covered with a leather patch. Odin, Jonathan thought, or was it Wotan? Whatever, there was no mistaking the Norse god. He carried a spear half again as tall as he was, ornately carved. Jonathan peered at the spear closely; something in the carvings fascinated him.

"The laws of the universe are carved on that staff." The blond giant to Jonathan's right spoke to him quietly. "It is the source of his power."

"It is the source of all power." The dark man behind him added. Jonathan simply nodded, suddenly entranced with what was on the stage. The booming melody seemed to promise answers to all the questions he'd never been able to put into words — not comfortable or pleasant answers, but answers all the same. His eyes were riveted on the spear. He had studied law before going into business, and the spear held all the appeal of the law: stern, ordered, infinitely complex.

He lost all track of the storyline. Somewhere in the front of his mind he registered talk of Siegmund and Sieglinde's dilemma, of Wotan's hope that Siegmund would be the one to deliver the gods from the path on which they were set. But deep inside there was only the spear and the melody, drowning out everything else around him, calling him. Calling to something deep inside him he hadn't even known was there.

When Brünnhilde came on stage, Jonathan almost came out of his seat. Brünnhilde, the first of the Valkyries and Wotan's favorite, strode onto the stage with a battle cry that seemed to echo around his skull, crystallizing his longing into a call to action. Her golden armor seemed to glow in the dim twilight of the stage, her breastplate shining like its own small sun cutting through the gloom. She was a large woman, not fat, but large-boned with enough muscle to carry her armor gracefully as she leapt from rock to rock. She could bench press three of me, Jonathan thought admiringly, suddenly forced to redefine his sense of feminine beauty.



The sets, which had seemed so real, stood revealed as the plaster and styrofoam fakes that they were. Wotan, so commanding before, seemed pale and insignificant, brushed aside by the force of Brünnhilde's song.

"I thought you didn't like opera." Jonathan turned and found himself gazing into the redhead's openly mocking face.

"Well, I hadn't really...." Jonathan tried to brush the man's hand aside and turn back to the stage, but even as he did the feelings began to fade. Wotan was singing now, Brünnhilde sitting at his feet listening intently. "I mean I never...."

He knew he was babbling, so he shut up. Brünnhilde's voice still tugged at him, and he tried to focus on her, to put all thought of the man beside him out of his mind. But he couldn't. He could feel the redhead's presence beside him, hear his breathing and the rustle of his clothes as he settled back in his chair. Somehow Jonathan knew the mocking smile was still there, growing wider at his confusion. He was about to turn and tell the redhead off, but something new was happening onstage.

Fricka, Wotan's wife, strode onto the stage like a rising storm. She was everything Brünnhilde was not, a dark cloud instead of light. She reproached her husband bitterly for allowing Siegmund to steal Hunding's wife, berated him for the incestuous nature of their love, demanded death for their misdeeds. Wotan seemed caught off guard. He tried to appease his wife, explained that Siegmund was the gods' only hope for recovering what they had lost. Fricka was unmoved.

"A hen-pecked god. No wonder they're doomed." The sneering voice beside him was too much for Jonathan and he spun around angrily to face the redhead.

"She's wrong."

"No," the voice of the dark man behind him came quiet as a whisper. "She was right. According to the laws that made him a god she had the right to demand justice."

"Is it justice that the gods should die?"

"It is the law." The tone of voice brooked no argument.

"It should have worked." The blond giant beside him spoke. "The plan was solid."

The redhead laughed. "The plan was flawed from the start. I'd expect some-

thing more from someone who claims to see the future." They were arguing over the top of him now, each leaning closer to make his point and blocking Jonathan's view of the stage.

"It can be a dangerous thing to see the future with only one eye." Again the dark man behind him spoke, silencing the argument. Jonathan closed his eyes in frustration. He had no idea what they were talking about, no idea why he should care, but he did. He was confused and scared, and he didn't like either feeling.

"In the wrong hands the law is nothing more than a weapon," he said quietly, to no one in particular.

"And in the right hands?" The dark man spoke again.

Jonathan found that he was smiling, a tight attacking smile. "An even better weapon."

The dark man nodded, and there was a sense of approval in his smile, as if Jonathan had passed some sort of test.

But up on stage the law took its prescribed course. Though Brünnhilde argued and pleaded, the sentence was passed down. Fricka smiled as Wotan ordered the Valkyrie to strengthen Hunding's hand in the coming battle. In the end Sieglinde was spared against Wotan's wishes, but Siegmund's sword was shattered and he fell to the enraged husband. The large man beside him wept openly, and although he knew they were only actors — and not all that good, he had to admit — Jonathan too felt a lump in his throat. He replayed the scenes over and over in his mind, arguing to himself about the dark man's pronouncement of the inevitability of the outcome. His mind reeled with plans and stratagems, arguments and rebuttals that might have saved Wotan's plans from ruin.

"So you're an opera fan after all." The sneering voice beside him pulled Jonathan out of his reverie. The act was ending and the house lights were just beginning to come up again. "I wouldn't have thought a man like you would have time for that. How did you end up here, again?"

Jonathan ignored him, turning his back pointedly on the other man. But the question still bothered him. He remembered getting up and showering that morning, and studying his notes for the big meeting at breakfast. And he was almost sure he rode the bus into work to give himself more time to polish his presentation. Had he ever given

the presentation? He couldn't remember.

He started scanning the audience for faces he knew. Hadn't the man asked him that earlier? Sure enough, there was Harold Walters from BeckTone. Jonathan had met him several times while their companies were working on joint ventures. Jonathan waved, but Harold didn't seem to notice him. Perhaps he didn't remember Jonathan; it had been a while. He saw several other faces as well — people he had met at trade shows or competed with for contracts. He'd never have guessed he knew so many opera fans.

Something about them nagged at his mind, but it wasn't until he saw Diana Parkin that he knew. He had been in the meeting where Diana had the stroke — he'd been the one to call the ambulance on his cellular, in fact. He tried to flag her down, but like the others she remained fixed on the stage in front of her. He'd heard she was dead, they all had. They'd sent around a collection for flowers and everything. Could they have heard wrong?

And then it hit him. It had been a ruptured appendix with Harold, dropped him while he was out on a sales trip back east. There must have been half-a-dozen coronaries among those he recognized, all of them fatal.

Jonathan swore and sat bolt upright in his chair, a feeling of vertigo threatening to overwhelm him. He felt a hand on his elbow and turned to face the blond giant. The large man put his other hand on Jonathan's shoulder and looked him in the eye. "Do not worry, it was an honorable death."

"What?" Jonathan said, but even as he said it he began to remember. The presentation had been a disaster. It hadn't been his fault, that idiot Moon had kept interrupting — something about an offer from one of the big Japanese companies. It was a terrible offer, a barely disguised attempt at a takeover. The discussion had gotten heated, and then....

He remembered the look on Moon's face changing to concern even before he felt the pain in his chest. Somehow his argument had turned into nothing more than a wheeze and he had to grab the table for support. Even the VP had come around the table to see what was the matter.

And then there was the opera. No transition that he could remember, no trip to the hospital. He looked up at the

ice-blue eyes of the large man, who nodded slowly. "You were right about the deal. It stank and Moon knew it, but your company wasn't the only one giving him a paycheck. You died defending what was yours. It was an honorable death."

"He is right," the voice behind him still carried a note of pride. "You fought and died well; you are worthy of Valhalla."

"Valhalla?" Realization was beginning to dawn on Jonathan and he wasn't sure he hadn't preferred being in the dark.

"Yes, Valhalla." The redhead spoke bitterly. "Just what you'd planned on doing with your MBA, wasn't it? Spending your time in a hall full of unwashed swordsmen fighting a losing war." He was shouting now, truly angry. "He's no warrior. He's a glorified merchant, shuffling papers for a living. He has no use for you."

"I don't understand," Jonathan said. He turned to the dark man. He was sure if he lifted those glasses it would reveal only one eye looking out at the world. "I mean, he's right. I'm no warrior."

"A merchant can die in battle as well as a soldier. You died defending what you thought was right. By law, you are a warrior. And as for your usefulness...." The dark man, Wotan, Jonathan thought, gestured to the stage. "Our dispute with the dwarves and the giants is mainly contractual, the result of a deal gone awry. Otherwise Alberich's ring and all its power would be mine. If I could have recovered it by force, I would have done so long ago. But I cannot break my word; it is the law."

"And the law in the right hands is a powerful weapon." The large man — Thor, was it? — gripped his shoulder tighter, then dropped his hand away. "These are modern times, and we need modern warriors. Are you with us?"

"Valhalla is yours by right." Wotan spoke again. "Would you pass up the deal of a lifetime?"

"The end of a lifetime." Loki — the other man had to be Loki — spoke bitterly. Hadn't the contract with the giants been Loki's idea in the first place?

The lights were dropping again and the curtain rose on a mountain peak overlooking a battlefield. Three Valkyries waited above as the others swept across the plain, plucking the souls of those who died well. The mu-

sic of the horns swelled until it seemed to fill him, echoing through all the hollow places, filling him with the love of battle. He had spent all his life in the business world and he had always known it was a battlefield. He'd loved the thrill of it, the challenge. By the time Brünnhilde swept down toward him he knew what he would do. Had there ever been any question?

The glorious maid reached down a hand, and Jonathan took it. These were modern times, and modern times called for modern methods. Jonathan smiled as Brünnhilde lifted him like a doll to

the back of her white charger. Perhaps the gods were not so doomed after all. And if not, he thought as they rushed towards the rainbow bridge that led to the home of the gods, if not, at least the end would be glorious. Jonathan would help see to that.

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RUSSELL WILLIAM ASPLUND was born in Canada but raised in Utah, where he currently lives with his wife and three children. He works as a multimedia programmer in order to feed his family and fund his addictions to music and sf. Russell has a story in one of Ellen

Datlow and Terri Windling's upcoming anthologies. "Der Ring des Nibelungen" was written for his mother, an opera fan, and his brother, an opera singer. Russell used to play in a rock band, but the rest of the family still talks to him anyway.

GEORGE BARR has been a professional artist since 1960 and has been one of *FANTASY Magazine's* favorite artists since our first issue (and one of our authors as well!). He won a Hugo as Best Fan Artist and has been nominated in the Pro Artist category as well; he has been a WorldCon Artist GoH.



Artwork by George Barr



A Proliferation of Potatoes

by Mark A. Garland and Lawrence Schimel

"What on earth is taking you so long?" Isabelle shrieked from the tavern's common room.

Moyra scurried across the inn's cluttered kitchen and collected another loaf of bread, which she brought to the cutting board and began to slice. It seemed that no matter how fast she worked, Isabelle would find it too slow and therefore just cause to apply her willow switch to Moyra's back and legs.

The knife's blade caught the tip of one finger in her hurry and Moyra winced. She put the finger in her mouth, then examined the cutting board, fearful she might have gotten blood on the bread and ruined the loaf.

Isabelle would take the switch to her for that — and the fact that she seemed to be taking too long. Moyra examined the finger, and discovered the cut wasn't as bad as she'd thought.

Isabelle burst through the heavy, latchless door from the common room. Her girth filled the doorway, and her darkened scowl was fit to wither plants.

Moyra finished slicing the bread in four quick strokes. "Coming!" she said.

"You'll be going — straight out into the street if you can't manage a better pace!" Isabelle snapped.

Moyra hurried the bread past her mistress.

"Worthless little wretch!"

"Yes, Isabelle," Moyra said, ducking her head. She dropped the bread off at the long, crowded table that filled the middle of the room, then she glanced out through the one large window to the village street beyond. The late summer sun was just setting, marking the midpoint of Moyra's day. By midnight, the patrons would be gone, and she would be asleep in the corner of the kitchen, where it was dry and warm. And where Isabelle would not trouble her, at least until sunrise.

"Another ale?" Moyra asked the old woman seated in the room's far front corner. She was Moyra's favorite, an odd, plump, gray little woman who wore a man's coat fine enough for a lord.

Ronwynn nodded and asked, as she always did, "Will you come by and talk while I drink it?"

"When I can," Moyra answered truthfully. Ronwynn always had a few kind words to spare, and an ear for anything Moyra might say. And she had never asked her for anything in return.

"I have a new story for you," Ronwynn said with a wink. Moyra felt her pulse quicken slightly. Ronwynn knew the most wonderful stories of heroes and far away lands, and magic. Moyra didn't really believe most of them, but she adored the telling. "A story about how a single potato saved an entire village, and changed a young girl's life."

"More stew!" John Olen yelled from across the room, a giant man who had been the local blacksmith forever. He ate at the tavern every night, and he always complained.

"Moyra!" Isabelle screamed as she burst back through the kitchen. "You'd let my customers starve!"

Ronwynn scowled at Isabelle. "It'll change, don't worry," she said, with a curious smile. Moyra shook her head and hurried away. There would be a beating that night, Moyra knew, and it would hurt.

Moyra was certain that she could hear a scratching at the door over the sounds of her sweeping the common room floor. She was afraid to stop and see what it was for fear that Isabelle would switch her again for laziness; her skin still stung from the beating she had received the night before. It hurt to walk, it hurt to sit. Moyra had seldom wished anyone ill in all her days, but

last night and up to this very minute, she wished a curse on Isabelle, wished it with all her might.

She tried to shake those wicked thoughts from her mind. Ronwynn had said things would change. She would take solace in that.

Isabelle suddenly entered the common room, and Moyra was glad she hadn't stopped sweeping.

"Can't you hear someone's at the door?" Isabelle groused, and stormed past Moyra to the great door. To herself she muttered, "Odd hour of the morning for anyone to be at the tavern door," as she opened it and looked out. The predawn street was empty, the scratcher having fled, or more likely, only the wind. Glancing down as she began to close the door, Isabelle noticed the small brown lump at her foot upon the doorstep.

"Devil take that cat!" she hissed, and kicked the lump away.

Isabelle began to close the door again but the lump landed with a thud that was too loud to be the body of a rodent. She stepped outside to get a better look.

It was a potato.

"Someone must have left it as payment," Moyra suggested. She could hardly breathe, she was so excited, remembering Ronwynn's never-heard story from last night. Ronwynn had promised that things would change.

"But for what?" Isabelle mused. Then she snapped, "Don't just stand there, put it with the others to be added to the pot!"

Moyra wondered briefly, as she went to place it next to the others, if it had more eyes than they did, but then decided that this potato's eyes just looked more prominent because the potato was shriveled.

"Aren't you finished yet?" Isabelle groused, coming through the door with her arms full of carrots and cabbage.

"If only they were evil eyes," Moyra wished, muttering under her breath and glaring at Isabelle's back as she put the potato down and hurried out of range of Isabelle's willow switch.

That night, just after dark, while Moyra mopped a spill on the common room floor, John Olen started howling like a wounded bear. The sound brought Isabelle running, along with most of the patrons who were dining at the tavern that evening. When they followed his thick, shaking finger and looked into bowl, they found an eyeball floating in his stew. A human eye-

ball.

"Isabelle's a witch!" John shouted, standing up and backing away from his table.

"The inn is cursed!" another man cried, trembling. He was pointing as he backed away from the long table in the middle of the room. As the crowd leaned near, every man and woman among them gasped. Eyeballs were popping up in everyone's soup.

"She must have killed a dozen men to get so many," John said. He grabbed his bowl and threw it across the room, sending stew flying.

"I'll not eat another drop!" Grare the baker exclaimed, throwing his bowl after John's.

"We'll never set foot in here again!" Grare's wife corrected.

"We're all cursed!" Wendela, the town's best seamstress declared.

"Get the mop!" Isabelle snarled, grabbing Moyra by the hair and yanking her away from the others.

"Get the witch! Get Isabelle!" John said, lunging at her. Isabelle screamed and turned to run, but it was too late. Half a dozen patrons had hold of her arms and skirts with a few seconds.

"How do we get rid of the curses you've put on us?" Grare and John both demanded, followed by a chorus of similar demands from the others.

"That won't be easy, but it can be done," a soft old voice said from the doorway. Moyra looked up with the others. It was Ronwynn.

"Say what you know," John demanded, taking a step toward Ronwynn. The entire clump of people, with Isabelle squirming in the middle, moved with him.

"Someone's set the evil eye on you all, that's certain." Moyra felt her breath catch in her throat. "Though I doubt she'd killed anyone. She could have done it any number of ways. Something in the stew, I'm sure. A potato, perhaps." She looked at Moyra, and winked. "Or a most unpalatable portion," Ronwynn went on.

"But why?" the seamstress asked, of no one in particular.

"Because she is a miserable old hag!" John said, tugging at Isabelle.

"I'm no witch!" Isabelle protested. "And I've killed no one. And you're a dead man, John Olen!"

"In any case," Ronwynn went on, "it'll take something rare and powerful to undo what she's done."

Everyone waited for Ronwynn to go

on.

"Goodness," she said. "She must swear never to curse or to utter another unkind word, nor commit an unkind act, so long as she draws breath."

Everyone gasped, except Isabelle, whose open mouth produced only a small choking sound.

"Let's have it, then!" John commanded her, and the others added their chorus of assents.

"Are you all out of your minds!" Isabelle protested.

"Then, she must eat all the stew," Ronwynn said quietly. "Moyra, perhaps you can help with that?"

No one moved for several seconds, especially Moyra. Then Grare and his wife headed for the kitchen. At Ronwynn's nod, Moyra, shaking, went after them. They returned in a moment, rag-covered hands hauling the big pot of stew from the kitchen.

Isabelle started flailing wildly, which sent everyone tumbling, including John, but in a moment they had her pinned down again. They wrestled her to her knees, then bent her head over the pot. Eyeballs floated everywhere in the stew, bobbing up in down as if winking at Isabelle in mockery. Moyra noticed there was not a speck of color in Isabelle's lips and skin.

"All right!" Isabelle screamed, screamed it seven times until the crowd pulled her head back a little. "I swear," she said, "not a foul word or deed, not ever again!"

Ronwynn wandered up behind Moyra, and put one hand on her shoulder. "I told you things would change," she said in Moyra's ear, so that no one else could hear.

"How did you do that?" she asked.

"You did," Ronwynn told her, "with the help of a potato. You made a wish. Now wish for the eyes to go away," she whispered. Moyra turned and looked at her. "Just do it," Ronwynn urged again. Moyra did as she was told.

"It worked!" the seamstress shouted, beating John and Grare to it. "The evil eyes have all disappeared!"

Moyra took a breath, then tried to find her voice again. "Very well," she asked, "how did I do that?"

"You are a very special girl," Ronwynn said. "You have a gift. One I can teach you a great deal about. I have suspected this for some time, but I wasn't sure until today."

Moyra was stunned. She had never dreamed of such a thing, and began to

wonder how many of Ronwynn's stories, which she'd always believed to be mere fables, were in fact true. Moyra, ever practical, wondered if she would have time to be Ronwynn's apprentice, and Isabelle's. She didn't think so.

Perhaps this was what Ronwynn truly meant when she said that things would change.

"Moyra!" Isabelle snapped, on her own two feet again as the crowd dispersed, most of them headed straight for the door. "We've got a lot of cleaning up to do."

"I didn't hear you say 'please'," Ronwynn said.

Isabelle swallowed hard enough to gulp her tongue.

"Please..."

Ronwynn smiled, and Moyra smiled back. "Thank you," Moyra said, cling-

ing to her mop. Then she let it go. ❄

LAWRENCE SCHIMEL's most recent books include the benefit cookbook, **FOOD FOR LIFE**, and the anthology **TAROT FANTASTIC**. His short story collection **THE DRAG QUEEN OF ELFLAND** will be published in May.

MARK A. GARLAND's novels include **DORELLA**, **DEMON BLADE**, **SWORDS OF THE PROPHETS** (forthcoming), **GHOST OF A CHANCE**, and **TRIAL BY ERROR**. His short fiction has appeared in *Analog*, *Scream Factory*, and in several anthologies.

LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK is a two-time recipient of the Canadian Aurora Award for Artistic Achievement. Her artwork has appeared in many publications and is now included on the CD-ROM "Atlantis to the Stars".



Artwork by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

An Interview with Susan Schwartz

by Darrell Schweitzer

Susan Schwartz — actually Dr. Susan Schwartz — is a lapsed academic with a Ph.D. in English (specifically, medieval English literature) from Harvard. So why isn't she working on a great Arthurian novel? Well, she already wrote a terrific one, **THE GRAIL OF HEARTS**, published by Tor in 1992. Since then, she's been busy with other projects: her own stories (she's had over seventy published), novels, anthologies, and reviews for such diverse fora as *The New York Times* and *Vogue*; collaborating with Andre Norton; working as a financial writer and editor on Wall Street; and as she says, "spending too much time on the Nets that she could use going to the opera, shopping, or even — heaven forbid — having a life."

Contrary to what some of her publishers and editors believe, there is no *c* in her name.

Until recently, Susan was particularly active in GENIE's Military RT, and she is legendary on GENIE for her Science Fiction RT activities. (Most users restrict themselves to a few topics; Dr. Schwartz has always read all the new messages. All.)

She has been nominated five times for a Nebula Award and twice for a Hugo, as well as receiving nominations for awards in the fantasy and mystery fields. Her story "Escape Artists" will be featured in an upcoming issue of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *FANTASY Magazine*. Raised in the Midwest, she now lives in New York with her computer, lots of books, and a notorious shoe collection.

MZBFM: A great deal of your fiction, including your recently published novel, **SHARDS OF EMPIRE**, is informed by a strong sense of history. So I suppose the obvious place to start is discussing the fantasy aspects of the fantasy-historical novel. These could presumably have been straight, realistic historical novels. Why are they not? What is the special use for fantasy in conjunction with history?

Schwartz: The historical fantasy story is one in which, as with all fantasies, there is magic and the magic works and should drive the action of the plot in the sense that the science drives the action in a classic science-fiction plot. The reason that they are historical fantasies rather than straight historicals is that the magic is magic derived from the actual time in which I am writing. For example, in the eleventh-century setting of **SHARDS OF EMPIRE**,

I'm dealing with esoteric Christianity. I'm dealing with esoteric Judaism. Because I am — or my story is — in Anatolia and Cappadocia — I visited there — it's an area in which the ancient magic and religion are very close to the surface, like in Arslan near Hattusas, Hittite things, the leopard-goddess from Catal-Höyük. When I was over there, I thought, *Oh boy, this is useful stuff. I can write about this.* But the thing is that, for the magic to be effective in a historical fantasy, it must be magic that's derived from the period in which I'm working. [Anatolia was in what is now central Turkey; Cappadocia was in southern Turkey, as are Hattusas and Catal-Höyük. Catal-Höyük, in southern Turkey, is one of the oldest continuously-inhabited sites in the world. The initial C is pronounced "ch" and should have a ~ over it, but we couldn't figure out how to typeset it.-- Ed.]

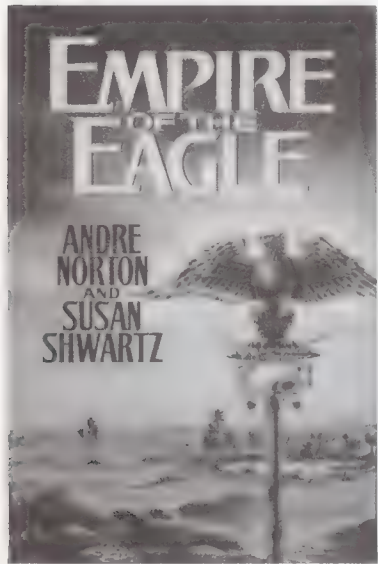
MZBFM: I think that the historical period also has to resonate with the plot. So, do you pick a historical period and then construct a story set in it, or do you pick a historical period which fits the plot you have in mind?

Actually what I do is wait until alarm bells and fireworks go off inside my head, and I think *that's neat. I really, really like that.* And I never know what's going to start me off with that reaction. It could be seeing something. It could be going someplace. It could be an artifact. There was a necklace — amethyst, freshwater pearls, and aquamarines at the Metropolitan Museum in New York — which belonged to a Byzantine princess, and the princess materialized and said, "I think you ought to buy this," which I didn't, and "I think you ought to write about me," which I did.

Or it could be something in a vacation that says, "Oh, wow, this would certainly make a good book."

For **SHARDS OF EMPIRE**, you went to Turkey and found a bunch of things.

I had always wanted to go there. I had written books set in a kind of alternative Egypto-Byzantine Empire, and then **SILK ROADS AND SHADOWS** was ninth century, so I wound up in Turkey, and I went down to Cappadocia, and I had not seen the cave-cities. I had really not even heard about them, and I was in there, about nine levels underground. I looked at my guide — because I was travelling with a guide and driver — and I looked up the air-shaft and said, "If I were invading, how would you take one of these?" And Ali, my guide, looked at me and must have thought, *Oh my gosh, the American lady novelist is nuts.* And I said, "It's all right. I write novels." And we started figuring out how one would capture one of these. I looked for a sort of nexus event, and what I came up with was the disastrous late-eleventh-century battle of Manzikert where an emperor was taken



prisoner. It was, essentially, where the dike burst, and the Turks who had been coming into the Byzantine Empire now were able to flood into Anatolia. The Byzantines themselves knew it was the beginning of the end. They referred to it as "that dreadful day".

I wanted to see what was happening as a result of it, and the battle was lost because of treachery, so I thought, well, let's put somebody close to this who witnesses it, and see what we can come up with. The rest of it was Richard Curtis's fault — he is my agent — because he said he wanted to see something about the Jews of Byzantium. So I did.

We get back to the original question: why not a straight historical novel about the Jews of Byzantium?

Because I wanted the magic. It sounds kind of strange, but I'm an English medievalist. I grew up in the American Midwest. I live in New York. Nevertheless, I got to Istanbul, and the place just felt right. Five thousand years back, maybe, I was a Middle Easterner or Near Easterner. I just felt very comfortable there. The resonances were good, and something was talking to me, and when something is talking to me, I'm not talking analytically.

I think that in a sense a historical fantasy is more realistic than a straight historical novel, because the people of the time clearly believed in the everyday reality of magic and the supernatural, and to not include this in the novel would be to impose a twentieth-century sensibility on the material.

I think you're absolutely right. Byzantium was not a secular culture. Eleventh-century Turkestan, if you can call it that, and eleventh-century Persia were not secular societies. Earlier societies did see powers about them. So this doesn't trouble me one single bit. I think of how in our mechanistic age, we nevertheless read horoscopes and check our fortune-cookies and indulge in magical activities like salt pouring over your shoulder and knock wood. That, as you say, makes a difference.

I suppose that an eleventh-century reader would say, "Oh yes, things like that happen. This is a realistic narrative."

I wouldn't go so far as to say that. I'm telling a story. What I try to do is create an illusion of period. I'm not there. I've never been there. I'd never be there back in the eleventh century and I probably wouldn't survive even if I went back there. So what I have to do is create an illusion which the reader finds intellectually satisfying and emotionally resonant.

Does your research then determine what comes in the story, or does the story then direct you to do research to find something that fits?

I like researching. Research is what I do so I can avoid writing. Research is what I was trained to do. What I did for **SHARDS** and for **CROSS AND CRESCENT** (which is the working title for the book that follows it on the First Crusade) was get access to the Center of Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C. Basically what I did was go down there and look at the artifacts and start reading the books, the primary texts in translation, of the period. I knew which area I wanted to work in. I knew I wanted to do the Battle of Manzikert, so I read everything I could about the Battle of Manzikert. I knew I was dealing with the Jews of Byzantium, so I was reading what I could find there, and I was hoping that I would eventually do enough research that things would start to emerge from the pattern.

Well, I found out some interesting things about the Jews' position in Byzantine canon law. There were laws against

intermarriage, which means it probably happened pretty often. I found out very interesting things about the culture. I was reading about Cappadocia. And then I took a look about the emperor about whom I was writing, Diogenes Romanus IV, who I knew was blinded out in Kutahya, which is a pottery center now; and saw that he wasn't just blinded by imperial soldiers. They drafted a Jewish merchant. This is the sort of thing you look at and say, "Oh my. I can use this. I'm going to steal it." If you do enough research and you do it right, sooner or later, the research is going to tell the story for you. You can't make these things up. You have to find them.

I suppose this gives you a sense of humility to realize that there are things better than what you can imagine.

Me, I'm just a magpie. I pick 'em up. I don't even feel the humility because I'm too busy being delighted, and I'm also scared. Can I pull this off? Can I get this effect right? Can I make this emotionally convincing?

I set myself a rough task in **SHARDS OF EMPIRE** because I was dealing with an eleventh-century man who had the equivalent of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in our own century. And I knew from a book by Dr. Shays, **ACHILLES IN VIETNAM**, what the symptomatology of that is in a Vietnam veteran, and I wanted to try to take it back into Byzantium and see the effects of how a particularly treacherous defeat worked on a sensitive man who was a reluctant fighter. It was kind of an interesting thing to do. I was afraid of it. I was also concerned about doing what is really a massed set of cavalry charges and creating not just the effect but the emotion and making it convincing enough so that a veteran might not look at it and say, "Oh my God, lady, tend to your knitting," or something sexist like that. And I did it.

Were you able to find any firsthand accounts by somebody who had actually fought the battle and could tell you what it was like to be there?

Harry Turtledove was kind enough to let me use his translation of Attalietes, who served under Diogenes Romanus, who fancied himself, and was, a good military historian. The Byzantines tended to produce good ones. Attalietes was an eyewitness, and he was on Romanus's side. So I did get to use this. For the rest of it, historian Michael Psellus wasn't there. Historian/Princess Anna Comnena certainly wasn't there. She was much later, but she would have spoken to veterans of the war, and her sources are usually quite good for military history.

I should think that what the novelist would be looking for at this point would be someone who could tell you what the camp routine was like, what it felt like to wear the armor, and what they ate for breakfast, and what the soldiers complained about.

You have things like that in the Byzantine History library. I used the **STRATEGICON** of Maurice. I used Leo's **TACTICS**. I used Nicephorus Phocas's **ON SHADOW WARFARE**. They have all these things codified and laid down. The Byzantines were great paymasters. The Byzantine armies were excellent ones, although they fell on very hard times, and this was one of the



times in which they were in some disarray. The coinage was in bad shape and they weren't paying. So they got desertions. Also they had brought in, as the western Romans did, a lot of federates, a lot of Turks, in fact. A lot of Norman mercenaries; and Byzantines always had trouble with Norman mercenaries, even though their own works, like the **STRATEGICON** of Maurice, laid down how you deal with the Celts, how you deal with this group of people, with that group of people — they all come under the heading of *barbaroi*, barbarians or outlanders. The Byzantines studied them quite pragmatically and figured out how to exploit them.

I've encountered historians who say that, basically, there's no substitute for bad generalship. Romanus screwed it up.

Romanus didn't screw it up. He made some bad moves. But, at some point he was at least a competent general. I was reading Trevor Depuy, and Depuy says what they needed really was a man of genius, which Romanus wasn't. He was a general who was good enough. He had always been good enough. But he was up against a general who was better than he, Alp Arslan, and his Persians. Also, no general is proof against the treason of his second in command, which is what happened to Romanus.

He did let himself get suckered into an overextended charge all the way across the field. I believe that the manuals said never do that against Turks.

No, you never do that against Turks because the Turks will always draw back, and then they'll come and get you, and their aim is very good. And he left his camp unguarded, but it seemed like a reasonable thing to do at the time, and it seemed to me from my own reading of the battle that he was winning. He did make some mistakes, but they were not mistakes that should have been irrevocable, and if he had been able to bring up the second line, the rear guard, I think he probably would have won the day. Alp Arslan did ask for terms. This was a feint, of course, but he did ask. I think, at the very least, Romanus would have had a fighting chance, if he hadn't been betrayed.

This is how you get into alternate history, wondering what would have happened if it had gone the other way, as in your own series of novels based on the premise that Antony and Cleopatra won at Actium. What special appeal do you find in this kind of writing?

It's a game. For me it's one of the most absorbing mental disciplines I've ever found. It's a lot of fun. You take a point in history and you work it the other way. I've written a number of shorter pieces on this. You get to play with characters who lost and make them out to be winners. You get to change the background.

For example, I did a story that was a Nebula nominee, called "Loose Cannon" in **ALTERNATE HEROES**. I've always been fascinated with Lawrence of Arabia, who died in 1935 in a motorcycle crash. At the time there were rumors. Churchill had always favored Lawrence. Churchill was very interested in bringing him forward again, although he'd



retired from the tank corps and from the R.A.F., and it was '35. After the crash, there were rumors that the Germans had caused it. I know it was a wild rumor. But my premise was that he survived. He didn't have that shattered head. Churchill had him patched together both physically and mentally. I gave him what the British would call an alienist — a psychoanalyst — Ernest Jones, who was a Freudian scholar and literary critic, and they put him back together. So I begin my story "Loose Cannon" — which is a good description of Lawrence — in the middle of the Battle of Britain. A cathedral has been hit. Somebody has been caught under a beam, and a small man limps over and, with unusual strength, pries the guy out. The man who has been rescued looks at him and says, "Don't I know you?" "No." And someone comes up and says, "Colonel, they're waiting for you at Number 10." I got the image for this story, not just from my fascination with Lawrence, but the image of the beleaguered St. Paul's Cathedral during the Blitz.

I think this is what we're looking for in such stories. Some alternate histories are just elaborate games — rearranging the pieces like Scrabble tiles — but the best stories come from such images, which resonate deeply.

Another story I did, and I suppose it's the most powerful I've written, is "Suppose They Gave a Peace." It was up for the Nebula and Hugo and was in Resnick's **ALTERNATE PRESIDENTS**. That story was the most deeply meaningful to me, because it concerned my own activism against the Vietnam War. When I started college, a boy who had been the paperboy on my street was killed by friendly fire, and my mother told about going over there with the flag. Another young man on that street came back in very, very bad shape.

This always spoke to me. I am a person who went from

being a pacifist to a person who reads one heck of a lot of military history and talks with veterans a lot. A lot of my life has been spent trying to look at this scourge of war that we don't seem to be able to shake and probably that we are not going to be able to shake, and I'm trying to come to terms with it. I told this story in a first-person voice singular that was my father's voice, and I told the story of an Ohio lawyer who is coming home and sees that the military car is outside his house. He has — or had — a son who is a Marine. He has a daughter who

is a political activist. He has a world in flux. And I tried to tell this one. This was very much the way my life was, although I had no brother. My father was an army captain and a veteran of the Battle of the Bulge. It was always hard to square my father's own silent pride in his service and my own pride in his ability to protect us against Nazis, since I'm Jewish, with my own utter opposition to the Vietnam war. A lot of what I'm writing is a meditation on war. I'm not comfortable with doing this, but, on the other hand, I don't think the writing particularly gives a damn if I'm comfortable or not.

If you were utterly comfortable, the writing would lose its edge.

It wouldn't be anything I'd want to read. It would be fuzzy and derivative. Writing, to a great extent, is conflict, conflict



among characters, conflict in situation, someone being conflicted with his or her role. I can write funny. I can write joyous. **SHARDS OF EMPIRE** was, in some ways, one of the easiest books for me to write because my characters gave me no resistance. Now in **THE GRAIL OF HEARTS**, they fought me like a son-of-a-gun.

You've also collaborated with other writers. How did your collaboration with Andre Norton come about?

Andre saw my book, **SILK ROADS AND SHADOWS**. Andre, unbeknownst to me, had been studying China and the Silk Road for twenty or thirty years, and she wrote the story of Chao Chun, who was an adoptive princess in the Han Dynasty, who married the heir to the ruler of the Hsiung-nu and went out into western China, into what is now the Uighur Autonomous Republic, which is also a great, howling wilderness.

So Andre suggested a collaboration, and didn't I want to come down and work with all her marvelous research materials? I couldn't get there fast enough.

So here you are collaborating with a legendary figure whose work most of us grew up reading. What happens next? Does she give you an outline of the proposed story or do you give her a draft, or what?

Andre tells me what she wants to do, and I say, "Yes, that's interesting. What about this? What about that?" We bat it back and forth. We evolve a proposal and then we go off and we work on it. I'll usually produce most of a first draft, and then she shows me how it really should be done. She is a senior pro; and the tricks of the trade that a senior pro does effortlessly are really an education in themselves for me.

So, what are you doing now?

I just turned in a very large historical fantasy. It's set about twenty-five years after **SHARDS OF EMPIRE** begins, about the time that the news got out of the Rhineland massacres, which is what they started out with in the First Crusade before they even got to the Middle East. I start out with the Byzantines and the Byzantine Jews finding out that they're getting the Normans coming over with all the westerners. They're here. There goes the neighborhood. It's going to get worse. I deal with some of the characters from **SHARDS OF EMPIRE** and, basically, I go through the First Crusade.

Josepha Sherman and I are writing a *Star Trek* novel in the Classic Trek series, focusing mostly on Mr. Spock, and I am researching around and waiting for something to come and talk to me and grab me.

Thank you, Susan Shwartz.



A partial bibliography of Susan Shwartz's work includes her most recent novel, **SHARDS OF EMPIRE** (Tor), set in eleventh-century Byzantium. **CROSS AND CRESCENT**, a novel of the First Crusade, will be released by Tor in December, 1997. An earlier novel, **THE GRAIL OF HEARTS**, was also published by Tor. She has collaborated with Andre Norton on two novels, **IMPERIAL LADY**

and **EMPIRE OF THE EAGLE** (both from Tor). She and Josepha Sherman have a July 1997 *Star Trek* novel coming from Pocket/Simon & Schuster, **VULCAN'S FORGE**, and they're hoping to do a second *Star Trek* novel as well. She has edited four fantasy anthologies, two volumes of **SISTERS IN FANTASY** for Roc and **ARABESQUES** and **ARABESQUES 2** for Avon.

Letters

Music to Our Ears

James Wilson, Portland OR

Thanks again for taking the time to comment on one of my submissions, in this case "The Reverend Mother Ulricka". It is a rare treat to enjoy a rejection; however, the image of your disbelief hanging by the neck until dead will remain with me for quite a while. I guess I didn't convince you. Anyway, point well taken, and I'll be sure to self-critique on that point from now on.

Another satisfied customer of the MZB School of Hard Knocks.

(Seriously, we don't try to discourage people with our rejections letters, but we do try to point out areas that might be improved.)

— reh

Grammaticus Regina

Amy Holberg, CA

I have been finishing all the last bits of business from last semester's classes and getting prepared to begin this one, and I wanted to write and thank you again for speaking to my Rhetoric 1B class. I heard nothing but good things from the students about both you and Ms. Waters. They appreciated both the advice on writing you had to give, and the

discussion of your own work, in particular **MISTS OF AVALON** which, I can promise you, they had all read with great attention. As a composition teacher, I also appreciated all your sane words about the importance of getting the mechanics of writing (grammar, presentation, *spelling*) right. Unfortunately, those of us at (college name omitted) who still emphasize mechanics are often made to feel as though we are somehow devaluing the students' ideas. Hearing that the same skills are expected in the "real" world really drove the point home, I think. On a personal note, I was also thrilled to meet one of my absolute favorite science fiction writers in person.

You're very welcome; when I'm up to it, I enjoy talking to students.

— MZB

Mmm, mmm, crunchy!

Debbie Gunther, Mounds View MN

Thank you for the continuing excellent quality of artwork and writing presented by MZBFM each quarter. I have devoured each issue cover to cover since the magazine's inception, and thoroughly enjoyed each and every bite. Keep up

the good work!

Debbie, every bite? Okay, what wine goes best with an MZBFM-and-cheese sandwich?

— reh

Out of Bounds

Walter Williamson, Albuquerque NM

Thank you for taking the time to read my story "The Naase". While I am disappointed that you did not think it suitable for *FANTASY*, I do appreciate your suggestion that I send it to a market dedicated to horror. It was the first, and probably only, "horror" story that I have written, and frankly I thought of it more as macabre and suggestively erotic.

Not having read extensively in the horror genre, I really do not have a good feel for where the boundaries are. The first hint should have been my wife's insistence that I sleep outside after she read it, and my critique group's refusal to tell me where their next meeting was. But I do apologize for having endangered your lunch.

I am a recent subscriber to *FANTASY* and have enjoyed the magazine very much. I particularly appreciate the encouragement you give to new writers, and your willingness to share your knowledge with others.

You sound as if you might be right to try a funny story. — MZB

Several times a year we get a query sort of like this one (which has been fictionalized to protect the innocent)

J.Q. Author, Sometown USA

I would like to reach Marion Zimmer Bradley. I have been working on a story for about a month now. I have based one of my characters, named Morgaine, after Mrs. Bradley's character Morgaine. The story does not follow the story that she wrote, but I did use the same basic character profile. I was wondering if this is going to be a problem. If so, what do I need to do to fix it?

— J.Q. Author

J.Q., copyright law is complex, but basically, you must provide your own "take" on historic or mythical characters when you write about them. Otherwise you must have written permission from the original author from whom your characterization derived (in this case, Mrs. Bradley). I can't speak for her, but I doubt she would grant such permission. (I'm forwarding copies of both your original message and my answer to Mrs. Bradley's agent, Russell Galen.)

Try Crétien de Troyes, various French romances (available in translation); Mallory, *LE MORTE D'ARTUR*; or even Tennyson's *IDYLLS OF THE KING* (but that's derivative of Mallory), as sources of the legend, and develop your own character for Morgan/Morgaine.

Thank you for writing.

— Rachel Holmen, Publisher

Dear Ms. Holmen,

The problem with what you are suggesting is that once again I would need permission from authors, which I would never get. I understand that Mrs. Bradley would not be likely to release her character. Therefore I have minimized my portrayal of Morgaine. I hope this is more satisfactory.

— J.Q. Author

J.Q. might do better to read Ann Sharp's column on the next

page, and then rework the story without giving up his character.

— reh

Try your own character, J.Q.

— MZB

More on Pen Names

Tom Sweeney, received by email

The MZBFM [web] page titled "On Pen Names" refers to "B. M. Bauer" as the writer of westerns. The name should be spelled "Bower". Actually, after her first book, "Chip of the Flying U", her name was Bertha Muzzy Sinclair. Her publishers, first Dillingham, then Little Brown, didn't want to lose the identification factor.

I'm not sure the publishers were the bad guys here, though. Had the public known that a woman authored "Chip of the Flying U", it probably would have sold about as many copies as a contemporary romance with "by William MacLeod Raine" on the cover.

It is humorous to some that women were once thought capable only of writing romances, and now male romance writers are assumed by many to be gay, as "men" are incapable of understanding the level of emotions and feelings required to write a romance.

One hopes that eventually the pendulum will stop swinging and approach the mid-position.

V/R

— Tom Sweeney

P.S. William MacLeod Raine was a western writer of Bertha Sinclair's time period.

Dear Mr. Sweeney,

Thank you for your fascinating message.

— Rachel Holmen

Dear Ms. Holmen,

You're welcome. It was a pleasure to see BM Bower mentioned, even if misspelled.

I believe her writing is vastly underrated, and that her novels were far better than those of Zane Grey. Her stories, even the "juveniles", had strong characters and didn't rely on pot-boiler cliches. She wrote about (then) contemporary western problems such as land development schemes and the decline of non-corporate ranching and mining, but somehow managed to tie in to the fictional west. Terrific author.

— Tom Sweeney

*Mrs. Bradley's comment on seeing Mr. Sweeney's remark about the pendulum returning to mid-position: **Speed the day!** She added, "Personally, I'd place **Bauer** well above Gray!" She is positive that Bauer is the correct spelling, so we won't change the web page to Bower.*

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Don't forget to vote for
your favorites —
the Cauldron ballot is on
page 64.

Ann Sharp

Talks to Writers:

Avoiding Stereotypes and Clichés

I've always thought that we late-twentieth-century people have more in common with our ancestors than we think, and this thought was confirmed when I came on a paragraph in a biography of an editor:

"We again repeat that we will not accept any stories where runaway horses or upsetting of boats is necessary to the dénouement. We have lately returned several otherwise good stories. Certainly some other incidents can be invented. Two lovers quarrel; how to reconcile them is the question. They are put on horseback, or in a wagon, or go sailing. The horses run away, or the boat upsets; the gentleman saves the lady. 'Oh, my preserver!' she exclaims, 'how I have misunderstood you!'

They embrace, and the thing is settled."

Do you recognize the infamous Plot A? This sample of the editorial moan about a clichéd plot is from Sarah J. Hale of Godey's *Lady's Book*, dated 1868.

A cliché is anything trite or hackneyed. A clichéd plot is an exact copy of one that's been done so many, many times before that the reader can predict exactly *what comes next*.

Now, everyone's first drafts — including mine — are usually peppered with clichés. It doesn't matter. The goal of the first draft is to get the story or the points down. Rex Stout may have published from the first draft, but the rest of us shouldn't.

Luckily, you are not stuck with a cliché. Clichés can be fixed as you rewrite. If the plot is an old one — and there are no new plots — you have several choices:

Update the story to the time and place you've chosen. *Barbara Cartland has made many millions out of rewriting Cinderella. A good many successful books have been rewritten out of updated Bible plots. Romeo and Juliet, too. And so on.*

Create a major complication around:

Something that did not exist in the past: *The most commonly used hard science fiction device: almost any Heinlein story follows this; he was a master at it.*

Something that existed only once in the past. *A particular event or circumstance — a war or international relationship.*

Around this major complication, create minor contemporary complications — *without making your characters anachronisms. On the one hand, people are people and have always been people and will continue to be people, and therefore they behave in predictable ways.* How would people just like most of us react when confronted with this entirely new situation? The trick lies in judging what is predictable and what isn't. What would *most* people do in this situation, and if your character wants to do something different, what impels him or her to act differently from the majority? A good historical novel is generally shown from the viewpoint of John, an ordinary person of no historical account, caught up in some major

historical conflict (Magna Carta, a Crusade, a revolution, a plot, a religious quarrel). John rarely has much idea of what is causing the upheaval in his world, and often none of the Great Leaders has much more. (This is usually a sign of good writing, since no-one living in the era would be distant enough to assess it, and the concept of doing so is historically recent, anyhow.) John's immediate problem is usually to survive. He is also likely to end up contributing to the problem (or more likely, the solution). If John and his girl manage to succeed at this, he will usually acquire a modest farm/estate/whatever to which he and the girl can ride off...into the sunset. John's concerns are timeless — something a reader of any other era can empathize with.

Choose a different viewpoint character. *Cinderella isn't a cliché any longer, if you're telling it from the viewpoint of the wicked stepmother. Or Romeo and Juliet from the viewpoint of Count Paris or Rosalind.*

Aside from an obligation to do well by your reader, you probably would squirm if your readers got a lot of amusement from your writing that you never intended them to have! Get an expert's opinion on any part of your writing where it's called for. In the first *Star Trek* series, Gene Roddenberry insisted that the behavior of the actors on the Enterprise bridge had to be consistent with real-life behavior on a U.S. Navy ship's bridge. Any deviation from this standard weakens your tale.

A clichéd character, especially a one-dimensional character, is a stereotype.

Avoid a stereotype — create an opposite. *An ex-Peace Corps, middle-income romantic hero instead of a millionaire. A teenager who can and does speak in complete sentences, without slang... If your private eye is the stereotypical hard-drinking swinger, perhaps he volunteers his time at a rehabilitation center.*

Avoid stereotypes by making characters conventional. *Perhaps your private eye should be a devoted husband and father instead of a hard-drinking swinger. Perhaps your lord should be neither drunk as a lord nor happy as a lord. Perhaps your spinster aunt shouldn't dither or flutter...*

Avoid a stereotype — draw on your own experience with people you have met. *This can be anywhere from noting characteristics all evangelists (let us say) have in common, right down to actually using Lemuel Jenkins, evangelist, as a thinly-disguised character in your roman à clef. Some writers recommend this, others say, "...I am too proud of my gentlemen to admit that they were only Mr. A or Colonel B."* If you do this, the sneaky way is to put these people in your early drafts under their own names, so they remain themselves, then change the names on the final version. For goodness' sake, don't forget to change the names, or you may end up with an expensive legal education you didn't really want.

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The Staff Talks Back: Cauldron Commentary

We got quite a few returns when we printed our questionnaire in issue #34. Thanks to everyone who took the time to reply! Most of you like the magazine just the way it is, but then, you're buying (or subscribing already), so you would. Nevertheless it is helpful to know **why** you like the magazine.

Most respondents gave us high marks for both the writers and stories we carry. That is to be expected, since we place our major emphasis on the quality of our writers and stories.

The writers most liked were the big names, such as Lynn Abbey, Poul and Karen Anderson, Emma Bull, C.J. Cherryh, Jo Clayton, Ellen Kushner, Barbara Hambly, Connie Willis, eluki bes shahar, Tanith Lee, Anne McCaffrey, Tanya Huff, Misty Lackey, Madeleine L'Engle, Elizabeth Moon, Andre Norton, Diana Paxson, Melanie Rawn, Jennifer Roberson, Elisabeth Waters, Deborah Wheeler, Ursule K. LeGuin, Peter S. Beagle, Roger Zelazny, Steve Brust, Robert Jordan, Tad Williams, Patricia McKillip, Jane Yolen, Patricia Wrede, Orson Scott Card, Stephen Donaldson, and of course Marion Zimmer Bradley. Some of the lesser known writers also got good marks, such as Steven Piziks and Carrie Martin. That pleases us here, since Marion started this magazine to provide a market for young writers. Several of the "big" writers were first published in Marion's anthologies or *MZB's FANTASY Magazine*. A few mentioned writers I've never heard of: Lynn Flewelling, Ann Marston, Sharon Kay Penman, Greer Ilene Gilman, and a title I didn't know, *FINDER*, which turns out to be an Emma Bull title (have to read it!).

Most liked sword and sorcery stories, quest stories, stories with humor or a "twist" at the end. Quite a few liked nontraditional fantasy, in a contemporary setting, though one said succinctly, "not modern"; another requested, "stories set in medieval or ancient-sounding times"; and a third prefers Arthurian-type fantasy. (Marion doesn't care for contemporary fantasy, either, but I enjoy it. — *reh*) One reader apologized for liking intelligent dragons; a kindred soul asked for "fantasies starring animals, birds." Another said, "Ones with strong women characters, some humor in them...." One person enjoys "a good fantasy set in space", and another asked for "other-worldly or fairy-tale-like [stories], ballads." Another favors "stories set in the now about elves or righteous vampires"; a different reader requested historical fantasy (the cover story of this issue should please them), and a third requested simply, "fairies." A few liked literary fantasy, heavy with symbolism. Some noted an appreciation for short-shorts. None liked horror or "dark Fantasy". Grim, nasty, bloody, and gory stories don't go well with our readers. One reader said, "stories that don't center around a sword", another said, "no sex trash".

On the whole, the artwork got good marks. Quite a few readers requested color artwork inside the issue, not just on the cover, but the cost is prohibitive unless we can multiply our circulation by a factor of ten and sell a lot more advertising. For now, we will try to put some color on our web page — for instance, you'll soon see all the book covers from recent interviews on the web in color. (One joy of the web is, it's the first medium in the history of the world where color

"printing" costs no more than black-and-white.)

George Barr, Vincent Di Fate, Alicia Austin, Gail Butler, Margaret Organ-Kean, Barb Armata, Michael Whelan, Alan Gutierrez, Armand Cabrera, Lori Deitrick, Bob Eggleton, Mark Poole, Carl Lundgren, Dean Morrissey, Tom Canty, and Janny Wurts were some of the artists mentioned. There was one request for Picasso; presumably our leg (does a magazine have a leg?) is being pulled. One reader mentioned Braldt Bralds and suggested we look for his work on a mint tea box sold by Celestial Seasonings. The reader probably didn't realize that this is the artist who did the beautiful cover art for the hardcover of Marion's own *MISTS OF AVALON*. Unfortunately, I doubt we could afford him, and I don't know how to reach him. People who don't even know who Tom Canty is, like his work: "the artist who did the jacket for Thomas the Rhymer", etc. We have tried to get Tom Canty to do artwork for us; he always claims he's too busy, which makes me wonder if the truth is that we can't pay him as much as he can command from book publishers. We are going to be asking more artists, including Carl Lundgren, for slides of work they've already painted but which has not been published. One reply requested "more art like George Barr or Armand Cabrera — less of the stark line drawings." I like both line drawings and what are called "halftones" — paintings rather than pen-and-ink drawings or scratchboard (the Di Fate illos in this issue were done on scratchboard) — but often I feel that the drawings with a sharp black-to-white contrast in them reproduce the best. One reader commented they like the paper we use. This may sound like a trivial compliment, but in fact our paper is chosen carefully, to be as opaque as possible yet lightweight enough to keep our postage costs down. (Having an opaque paper means that artwork on one side of a page doesn't make the text unreadable on the other side.) On the whole, though, most of our readers are print-oriented.

Readers like our nonfiction features: Marion's editorial and the writing column, the interviews. Some even say they read those first, and only get to the stories later. Some requested a book review column, but the logistics of a quarterly publication and the schedule of galley proofs by publishers pretty much makes that unfeasible. (One reader said plaintively, "Mainstream magazines completely ignore fantasy books, and I'd love to hear your opinions of new releases.") One reader's high compliment: "Please continue the editorials, letters, and the last word that creates such an intimate one-on-one feel between the magazine and the reader." The next sheet I turned over said, "Skip the last word and put in a short story."

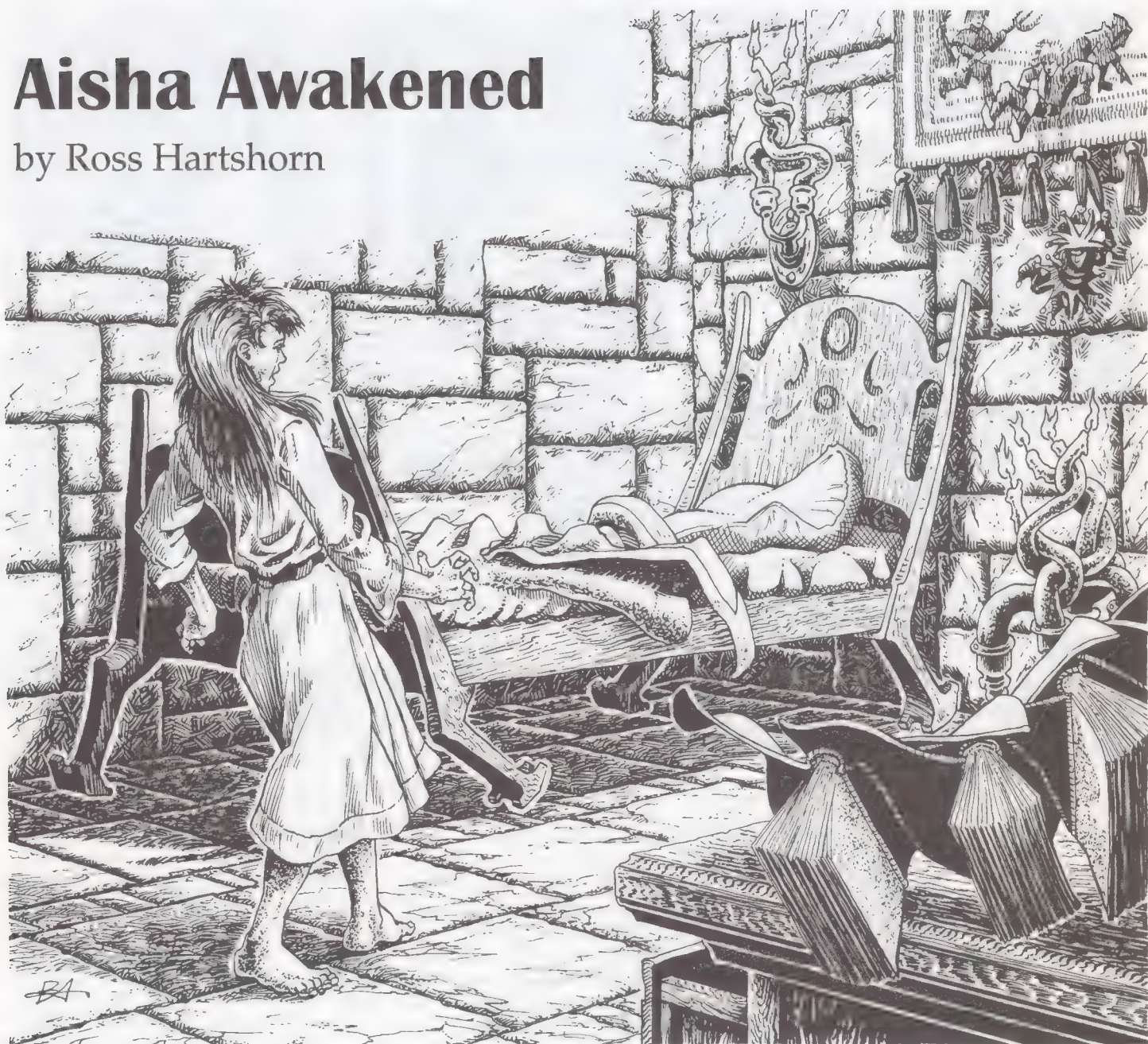
Most don't care that much for advertising that doesn't tell them about new books coming out in print, but they are prepared to regard it as a necessary evil. One wants "anything gothic". Several commented that they make up their "to buy" lists from our ads, then take the lists to bookstores. Half a dozen even asked for ads from *more* publishers, and one requested ads from artists with prints to sell.

— Raul S. Reyes and Rachel E. Holmen

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Aisha Awakened

by Ross Hartshorn



Artwork by Barb Armata

Aisha awoke with a start, and immediately noticed that her bed was walking across the room. Scrambling out of it, she stood on the cold stone floor of her bedchamber, dumb for a moment, blinking sleepily and shivering in her thin nightgown. The windows were shuttered, letting almost no light in, though the moon was near to full outside. She murmured a cantrip to light the candles, a moment later remembering her master's admonition never to use spellcraft unless fully awake. Looking around her simply decorated room, she reeled for a few moments at what she saw and heard.

The bed was still walking, having reached the far corner and now attempting, blindly, to keep going, as the headboard knocked repeatedly against the masonry wall. The figures on her single tapestry which hung on the wall, once simple peasants dancing in rings and cavorting in the trees, now argued and fought with one another, which was nearly as disturbing as the fact that they moved freely about the rough warp and woof of the wool hanging. She saw a russet-haired fellow rolling about on the ground as he wrestled a jongleur in motley and a fool's cap, while a maiden nearby shrieked and

howled in a pitiful, tiny voice.

The candles themselves curved and writhed in serpentine fashion, but thankfully stayed in their cast-iron candleholders. The books on her desk were linked, supple covers twisted like arms around their neighbors, and sang a tavern song of good life:

*"Oh, one for the brewer,
One for the barmaid,
One for the publican, too;
For they've never been,
In the presence of men,
Who quaffed like the likes of we two!"*

**ON THE DIVERSE PROPERTIES
OF MANDRAKE, by Prospero**



Artwork by Barb Arnata

Silencius, a large and weighty tome on a rather lightweight topic (or so her master, the wizard Augustus Asarius, had said), stood off to one side, muttering disapproval of unseemly behavior. Her little book of verse, **THE SHEPHERD AND THE MAID**, danced and twirled to the music of the singing, and in the back of Aisha's mind some part registered that the books of beast, bird, and herb were carrying the tenor part, while the more ponderous volumes on philosophy and cartography anchored the chorus with a deep bass.

For a few moments, Aisha's mind whirled with excuses for her oversight in using the charm without first achieving a proper state of concentration, thinking at first that it was the reason for the strange events around her. Then she recalled that the movement of the bed was what had awoken her in the first place, and realized that what she was seeing was not the result of an errant evocation, but some more serious problem. Throwing a heavy robe of dark gray flannel around her, she opened the door from her room out onto the winding staircase in the center of the tower.

Aisha was in her early twenties, with pale skin and thin, black hair that hung down to below her shoulders. Her eyes were hazel, alert and piercing, revealing an active and subtle mind behind them. Her features were thin and delicate, and her frame was boyish. She was not pretty, as such, but her movements and speech bristled with an energy and confidence, and that was what propelled her through life. It also explained why she was running up the stairs, in search of the source of the disturbance, and not away from it.

Guessing that such an event would have found its origin in the wizard's workshop, at the top of the tower, she sprinted up the steps, three at a time, nearly missing the demon that sat in her master's own bedchamber. She might never have seen it, had it not been for the door, which showed evidence of forced entry (it was, in fact, entirely missing except for the still-smoldering metal hinges). Looking in cautiously, she saw a sizable demon of the usual sort (fanged, giant bat's wings, dark leathery skin, glowing red eyes, etc.), perched on the mahogany table against the outer wall.

In its claws, it held a long, straight sword, set with a great emerald in its pommel and burnished to gleam like a looking glass. Aisha recognized Ataranna, the magical sword which her master had used in his younger days to gain possession of the castle he lived in. As he had aged, and his sword arm began to fail him, he had nimbly made the leap to magery, relying on a quick mind, a full coffer, and a largely (at that time) undeserved reputation for access to unnatural powers. With these assets, he had begun to assemble the library, workshop, and other trappings he required for his new profession. In time, he had learned enough to accomplish the minimum of magery necessary for appearances' sake, and he had faked that which he was not able to do. It was a clever mixture of illusion and sorcery that had worked to swell his reputation and keep his enemies at bay (until now). It had been nearly two years into her apprenticeship before Aisha had realized how little her master actually knew, and how recently he had learned that which he did know. She was able to use his name and wealth for ready access to the finest of wiz-

ardly resources, however, and given the penchant of other wizards to visit their peers in order to dispose of them, it seemed safer altogether to leave him as the figurehead of the keep.

With a sharp intake of breath, Aisha observed the head of the figurehead, now disconnected from its body, sitting on the wizard's desk with a pipe stuck in its mouth, the tobacco in it smoldering. She had the impression that he had not lit that pipe himself, nor placed it in his own mouth before losing his neck's hold on his shoulders. This pointed towards a grisly sense of humor on the part of the demon, which she realized had taken notice of her. Attached as she was to her place in the keep, she was more attached to her life, and hoped she would remain so after this conversation was over.

"You were probably not looking for me," said the demon, in a low bass grumble.

"Perhaps I was, after a fashion," said Aisha. "Are you responsible for the unusually animated nature of my bedchamber's furnishings?"

"Perhaps. Who are you?" The demon growled the question.

"I am called Aisha. May I ask who I have the honor of addressing?" Demons, though not easily duped, were fond of flattery, and would at least keep the speaker alive for long enough to bask in their sycophantic glow.

"You may," answered the demon.

There followed a pause.

"Who do I have the honor of addressing?" asked Aisha finally, when it became obvious that the demon would say no more without prompting.

"That is privileged information," said the demon. "You may call me Master, or Keeper of Your Soul, or That Which Could Smash You to Tiny Bits at a Whim."

"I see," said Aisha with a bow, "most honored, I'm sure."

"That you are. You are the first mortal, or entity of any sort, to behold my beauteous form in over three centuries."

Aisha frowned. "You came from inside the sword?"

Apparently, thought Aisha, the door had not been disintegrated as a means of egress, but was more probably a civilian casualty in the exchange between mage and demon in the room.

"Yes," answered the demon, his voice indicating some surprise, "you surmise well. I did not know that the source of

its power was so well known a fact."

"I do not believe that even my recently deceased Master knew that it contained a demon's soul," responded Aisha, "or he might have taken better precautions. I suppose it was your escape that released the surge of magical energy that has my library cavorting about the bookshelves downstairs. However, you seem to be eyeing it with more than normal curiosity, Great One."

The demon chuckled, a low rumble that seemed to shake the walls.

"It looks much different from the outside," he admitted, "and not as I had imagined it would."

"Didn't you see it before your imprisonment, Master of Hidden Wisdom?" asked Aisha. She chided herself to keep remembering the honorifics, so long as they did not imply or state a mastery of herself. Once acknowledged as a lord, the demon had perfect rights to your soul. On the other hand, insufficient flattery might save your soul but forfeit your life.

"No," answered the Demon, "or if I did, I did not bother to notice it. My eyes were more for the upstart who had conjured me."

Aisha said nothing, but she noted the merest flickering of his eyes towards her onetime tutor's wizard's staff. It lay on the ground between them, the crystal caged atop it a lusterless ebony, sucking in all light that chanced to fall into it. Aisha had suspected that it came from the same hoard where the young warrior Asarius had found the sword, Ataranna. If so, it might have belonged to the same mage that had fashioned the sword. The demon seemed to recognize it, and to associate it in his mind with the day of his binding.

Her mind racing, she began to see how Asarius may have brought on his own doom. They had known that the staff could be used to emit a beam of piercing light, and Aisha had learned enough in her divinations to determine a link between this beam and the soul. Perhaps it was the tool used to trap the demon's soul in the first place. Asarius had been trying something with it, then, and had inadvertently freed the demon that resided in his own sword. But what had he been attempting?

A pitiful mewing noise first diverted her from the question, then provided the answer. His cat, Erzurum (usually referred to by his more descriptive nickname, Filch), lay trussed on the long

table against one wall. She crossed to the cat, a longhaired gray, and quickly undid his bonds. He quickly leapt off the table, landing with a bit of a thump, and then paused and shook his paws, apparently still short of blood from the tightness of the bonds.

"So, did you find your revenge satisfying, Majestic One?" asked Aisha.

"Not at all," answered the demon. "The one who had imprisoned me had long ago died. The one I found in his place was an incompetent."

The long table was mirrored, but covered with a silk cloth patterned in blue and white swirls like waves or puffs of wind. Ataranna had been hanging on the wall behind the table, and Aisha saw a hole burned in the silk cloth just in front of it. The beam of light from the staff, perhaps, had burned through the cloth, and reflected off the mirrored table, hitting the sword. A freak accident? Or some trick managed by the demon even while it was imprisoned? Whichever, if the ray of light could trap a soul, it could release it, and that was how Asarius had met his end. Had his aim been so poor, or had Filch squirmed out of the way just in time? The cat was clever and obstinate (it had gained its nickname by finding its way into the most carefully guarded parts of the kitchen in order to steal food).

"That seems unjust," said Aisha, finding herself sympathizing for the demon somewhat, "to finally get your chance at retribution and find the target gone."

"Hah," snorted the demon. "Rarely do mortals pay the price of their own misdeeds. More often, you pay the price for your forebears."

Aisha looked up from the table to the demon, and frowned.

"I disagree, O Wise One," she said. "Primitive as it may sound, I believe we pay for our own sins, eventually."

The demon threw its head back, then, and roared a full-bodied laugh, terrifyingly loud. Aisha flinched from the sound, then regretted it. It would not do to appear a weakling in front of such a monster. Or would it? If there was one thing that would keep it from the thought of killing her more than the chance to be told how great it was, it would be the chance to disillusion an innocent. While she had not truly considered herself an "innocent" for some time, she still had the knack of appearing to be one...

"Impossible! No one left alive could

still believe such nonsense!"

It spat out the words derisively, then roared with laughter again. Aisha's lips tightened in a grimace, and she crossed over to the body of her late supposed mentor and removed his amulet, his rings, his belt with a series of runic inscriptions along its length. One by one, she placed these each on the workbench behind her. When she came to the staff, she tried to keep her expression and movements unchanging, but even so she heard the demon's laughter stop suddenly, and involuntarily she stopped breathing, expecting at any moment to be torn apart. With the staff, she could re-imprison the demon, but the beam would likely have to pass through both it and the receptacle. If it suspected that she knew how to use it, most likely it would decide to tear her limb from limb before she could try it. She reconsidered, and left it with the corpse, untouched.

"I believe it," she said. "We affect the world with our actions. If they are evil, they make the world a more tired, cynical, and desperate place. If they are good, they restore some hope and trust. We can spend more than we make, chop down trees we don't replant, sow corruption and lies. But we affect the world when we do so, and we live in the world, so we pay for our own sins."

"Your logic has more hole than fabric, apprentice. You mortals all live in the same world, and therefore you all pay for each other's sins as much as your own. Where is your cosmic justice in that?"

"We do not all live in precisely the same world, Reverend One," responded Aisha quickly, "because we all live only in some part of it. Some make their own world a place of fear and lies, self-deception and evaded responsibility. Others make their own world a place of honor and duty, of problems honestly faced and past mistakes acknowledged and paid for. As years pass, each one will find their own world to be of their making, because each person's private world is only one part of a vast universe."

"Bah! Are you wizard's apprentice or priest's acolyte? When the mage who bound me inside this sword did so, he enslaved another, surely an evil act even in my case. For that matter, so is a mortal conjuring me into your plane in the first place. Yet it was your recently deceased master who paid the price."

"But the one who imprisoned you

lived the life of a demonologist, and in the end he grew old and died in a tower that he had built which had become his own prison," countered Aisha. "It was his only place of refuge against a score of powerful enemies (supernatural and mundane) which he had made with his spells and sacrifices. He spent the last twenty years unable to leave that tower, and lived in constant fear that the defenses he had wrapped around it might not hold. This price he paid for deeds such as the one that concerned you."

"My master was killed because he dabbled in powerful forces he did not understand, and pretended to knowledge he did not have. No one has a right to do so and live, and in the end anyone who does so will suffer for it."

The demon narrowed its eyes and stared at Aisha for a few moments, thinking, either about her or what she had said, or both. Aisha used the pause to consider her own actions. The demon still held the sword in front of him, although idly, as a plaything, not as a weapon. If she could hit the crystal in its pommel with the beam from the staff, and the beam continued on through to strike the demon, she felt certain that it would be reimprisoned. On the other hand, aiming precisely enough to insure that she did so, would take more time than the demon was likely to give her. Some other, easier target then.

Filch had finished shaking his paws, and began prowling around the room. He had ignored the body after the merest sniff, and was now leaping from shelf to shelf, sniffing each book and bauble, as if inspecting his domain to insure that all was still well after the violence which had happened less than an hour before. He leapt up onto a carved wooden bookshelf, with a gargoyle's mouth that stretched to encircle its entire five shelves of scrolls and tomes. Filch could reach the fourth shelf from a standing start, and he arched his head up and around the shelf above to inspect what lay there. Satisfied, he dropped back down to the ground and strolled over to the standing mirror next to the bookshelf. The mirror's frame was aqua blue, and merfolk played all along its length. Filch arched his back and rubbed his head against the base of it.

Unsatisfied with an inorganic rubbing post, the cat moved to cross the room then, and leapt gracefully (and without invitation) into Aisha's lap.

She scratched absentmindedly behind his ears, and tried to look anywhere but the mirror, for that was now the most important item in the room. When rubbing against it, Filch had tilted it along its long axis, and it now held a reflection of the demon that Aisha could see. If she could hit the mirror and demon itself with the beam of light from the staff, she could trap its soul in the mirror, and live past this conversation.

"You have a conservative view of what is proper for mortals to deal in," mused the demon, "especially for one in your profession. What wizard, or wizard's apprentice for that matter, has confined its meddling to forces which it understood? If all your race heeded such a warning, you would never have harnessed fire to light a cave."

"Fire was understood, as much as needed to be by the first cavemen who used it," said Aisha.

"Hah! What would you know of the first cavemen? Did they know how plants store energy by harnessing the power of the sun, to grow in the first place? Did they understand why oxidation could release that energy? They did not. Yet they played with fire, and gained by it. Some who tamper with such mysterious forces suffer, some benefit from it, and some leave the price to be paid by those who come after. There is no balancing of the scales of justice in the sweep of history."

"You look for balance in every single act," said Aisha, "but it is a subtler, and grander thing than that, Wise One. Cavemen knew that fire consumed wood, that it was hot, that it could rage out of control, that it could provide light, that it would not burn rock or water or earth. So much they could learn from seeing the results of one lightning strike in the forest. They could know, therefore, how to start fire, how to feed it, and how to douse it if they needed to. Calling up forces you do not know how to get rid of, however, is unconscionable. Even more so if you do not know what the properties of them are."

Filch, annoyed at being unable to demand Aisha's undivided attention, hopped down off her lap and walked slowly back towards the door.

"Do you really believe that every mortal faces the results of its own misdeeds, and never manages to shift the price to an innocent, or a later generation? You are either an idiot or else you

argue from a perverse desire to disagree. In either case, I find you tiresome." With that, the demon began to uncross its legs, the expression on its face indicating that the conversation was at an end.

The next few instants of time seemed to Aisha, in retrospect, to have happened very slowly, although at the time she had not had time to think before acting. Before the demon had risen casually from its seated position, ready to destroy her as one throws away a toy that has become no longer amusing, she had thrown herself off the workbench and landed on the ground, near the body. With one hand reached out, she laid hold of the staff, and pointed it towards the mirror.

"K'nayeh tissoth eltar!" she shouted, the true name of the staff in the dead language of its original makers.

The amber ray of light that came out of the staff hit the mirror and reflected off it to strike the demon, but he had guessed her intention and raised the

sword up in front of him. The ray was nearly as broad across as a human eye, and part of the beam was reflected off Ataranna's blade, polished by its now-dead owner to a mirror finish. Split in two, part of the beam shot back across the room, passing inches in front of Aisha's face, while the rest hit the demon square in the chest.

Then the beam disappeared, and Aisha heard a squeal from her right. She looked over to see Filch, turned to face her and hissing. He made a sound that she had never heard him, or any other cat, make before, deep and resonant. He turned and sprinted from the room. Then she turned back to her left, and saw the demon blinking in confusion.

"Meow?" it said finally, in a low grumble.

"Oh my," said Aisha, "that's not what I meant to do at all."

*

ROSS HARTSHORN was trained as an electrical engineer, and worked as one

in California and Texas until he quit. He is quite happy to get something published, so that he can now describe himself as a "writer" instead of an "unemployed bum". As an avocation he sometimes delivers flowers at a Renaissance Faire, which doesn't pay much either but does get you some good story ideas and a lot of time for thinking. His apartment is a foster home for kittens whose owners just can't manage to take them back quite yet.

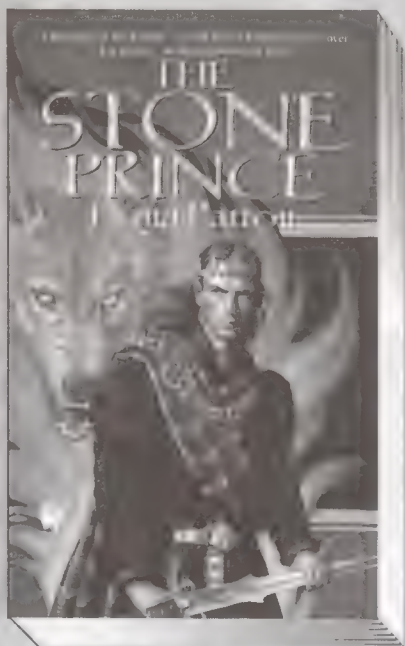
BARB ARMATA has lurked on the edges of the sf/fantasy art world for many years. She has drawn illustrations for many publications, most frequently for these pages. Her paintings have been displayed at both World Science Fiction and World Fantasy art shows, and can be found on numerous collectable card game cards. Primarily self-taught, Barb has done time working in print, ad, and graphics shops. She has a wide range of Fortean interests and hopes to return to the convention art show circuit soon.



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Opportunity Scratches

by John Fredericks

It was an awful day until the princess arrived.

Mac lay on his unmade bed. Music as grungy as his uncut hair rioted from the stereo speakers. He was intensely busy feeling sorry for himself, one of the few tasks at which he was both familiar and proficient. Today his chemistry teacher Fitzpatrick had "dissed" him again. In front of the entire class he said, "Maybe your grades would improve if you could keep your mouth shut for five minutes. The rest of humanity has that figured out, why don't you?" Yeah, well maybe Fitzpatrick should try being a little nicer when making up those tests, not like there was any hope of that happening.

And she had laughed at Fitzpatrick's remark, she, the one white, the one white...the one white something-or-other (Mac was absent the day they taught metaphors) amidst a gray haze of boring classes, study halls and gym socks. Now what was there to live for?

He looked across the room and saw a fantasy novel peeking out from its lair of discarded boxer shorts. The cover showed the hero, clad in a swishing cloak, wielding a sword in one hand and a glow of magic in the other. He would have known what to say to Fitzpatrick. Mac wasn't sure what that would be, but it would definitely be cool. He wished he had gotten farther in the book than the first chapter, but there were so many big words.

Without warning the princess ap-

peared in a sparkle of moondust and fairy glow. Her pink gown shimmered as if it were woven with silver threads. The scent of blooming lilacs floated from her smooth white neck to Mac's nose. He shook his head in disbelief. The princess simply looked at the piles of clothes and rock posters, as if she thought she were in the wrong place.

"Are you Mac?" Her voice tinkled like a wedding bell.

"Uh, yeah? Wha... How did you get here?" His mouth hung open more than usual.

"I am Bellamadonna, the Pulchritudinous Princess. I have come to take you away from all this."

She waved her hand at the Superfund Site that was his room.

Mac leaned across his bed and turned down the volume of White Zombie Blowfish just enough so he could hear better. "Take me away from all this?"

"We have an offer which I think you're going to find hard to refuse. May I sit down?"

"Sure." He pushed his schoolbooks to the floor and she sat next to him on the bed. Her perfume tickled his nostrils and he felt his shoulders relax as she spoke.

"I will take you away, to a beautiful place, a fairy kingdom. There you shall be my prince and husband. You will be the most revered man in the kingdom."

Sounds good so far, thought Mac, especially if she wears this perfume a lot.

"You will be considered wise beyond measure," she continued, "and live in a fine palace. Do you like the offer so far?"

"Sure princess, but I don't get it. What do you folks get in return?"

She smiled gently. "Sometimes one of our people becomes curious about the world outside the kingdom. They wish to expand their horizons. If you come to the kingdom, you will exchange bodies with one of our people. You will take the body of Prince Falalel, and he will take yours. This is not forever, unless you wish it to be. We have two, five, and ten year options available."

Mac thought of his life and couldn't imagine anyone wanting to be him. "Why would he want to become me?"

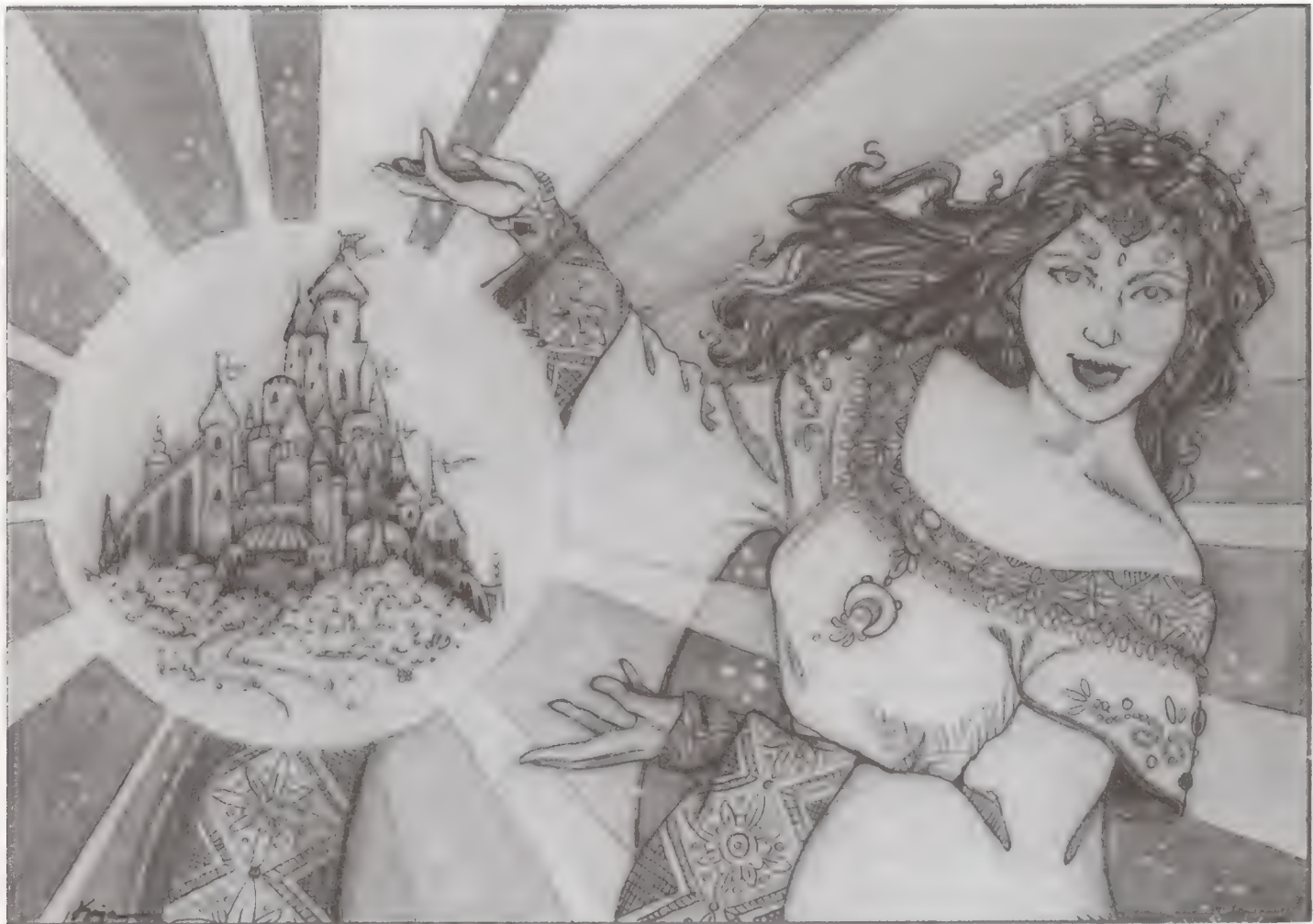
"There is suffering in your world, the likes of which is not seen in our kingdom. With your body, he can go and help those who are in need. We have been doing these trades for many years. Our people have been some of your most famous philanthropists, social workers, and even saints."

It didn't sound bad so far. After all, Mac admitted to himself, he wasn't likely to do any of those things. They took hard work. Maybe this switch was just the thing.

"So what do I do all day?" he asked.

"We eat fine foods, listen to beautiful music, attend plays, wear wonderful clothes. It is a life of total luxury."

"About the clothes and stuff." Mac was worried. "Can I bring my CD's



Artwork by Kaja Foglio

and just wear my own clothes?"

"No, I am sorry, but they do not befit a prince. You would wear fine silk and listen to gentle, sophisticated music."

Mac didn't like what he was hearing. But maybe there wasn't anybody like old man Fitzpatrick there. That might make up for the other stuff.

"You did say everyone would respect me? No one would put me down for who I am? That doesn't ever happen, does it?"

She took his hand in hers. "Almost never. If a malcontent should speak ill of you, we just ignore him. After all, we are royalty and it would be beneath us to act in a hostile manner."

"So you don't kick him in the teeth, or tear out his liver like in that video game *Cyborg Combat 8000*?"

She took her hand from his, casually wiping her palm on her skirt. "Perhaps our world does not appeal to you."

"Nah. I'm sorry, Princess, but I just wouldn't fit in. It sounds nice, but it's just not me."

The princess stood and moved to the center of the room.

"I thank you for your time."

In a flurry of haze and lilac pollen she was gone. The barbarian came next.

Mac had dozed after the princess left. A loud clank awoke him. He sat up in bed, convinced that the princess's visit had been part of his dream. What he saw made him hope that he was still dreaming. In the center of his room stood a tall long-haired man. His muscles were those of an ox on protein powder, and he was clad in boots and loincloth of animal skin. Across the rippling muscles of his back was strapped an immense sword, and a great horned helmet topped off the ensemble. The man smelled of sweat and fried animal fat. Mac slid back in his bed, trying to press himself into the wall.

The man spoke in a surprisingly gentle (if deep) voice. "You have nothing to fear. Thank you for your time this evening. I am Nocak, the Somewhat Barbaric, and I bring you an offer you won't want to refuse."

Mac motioned for the great specimen to sit and he did, making the edge

of the bed sag deeply.

"I had another visitor earlier. Are you going to make the same offer as the princess?"

"No, my lad. Her world was not for you. You seek adventure, excitement, perhaps even revenge."

At the word revenge, Fitzpatrick's face flashed through Mac's mind.

"Yes, if you agree to switch places with one of my people, you will travel through harsh lands, fight evil wizards and warlords, eat your meat right off the bone, and share the company of fine maidens who wear animal skin swimsuit-like attire."

Mac had to admit the offer was sounding better by the minute. He still had some questions, though.

"What about the guy I switch with? I mean, he's not going go cutting up the neighborhood with his sword?"

The barbarian laughed a rich, mead-smelling laugh.

"No, no. He'll go on to conquest in your world. Many of our people have become extremely successful businessmen, cut-throat lawyers, savvy politi-

cians. The warrior with whom you switch will do great things with your body."

"You mentioned something about revenge," Mac continued. "Can you tell me more?"

"Of course. In my world, we do not take insults and degradation. We fight back, forcing our enemies to recant their words or die."

"So I'll be as good a fighter as you when I come to your world?"

Nocak laughed once more. "Of course not. It'll take many days of practice to hone your skills with the sword. You must dedicate yourself to battle. But the rewards will be great, proudly will you wear your battle scars and grow to love the feel of your enemies' blood on your hands."

Hard work? Scars? Bleeding? Mac had enough of this.

"Uh, Mister Nocak, I don't think this world is for me either." The barbarian began to scowl. "Don't take me wrong, I appreciate the offer, but maybe you should try someone else."

Nocak's eyebrows knitted as he considered Mac's words. "Your honesty serves you well, young Mac. Perhaps you are right. I thank you for your time this evening." Just like that he was gone, though the smell of fried animal fat would hang in the room for days.

Mac leaned across the bed to increase the volume on his stereo, when he heard a low scratching sound. Mac turned to find the strangest visitor of all standing in the middle of the room scratching its armpit. The troll stood, well, hunched, about five feet tall. He was green and warty and dressed only in a filthy cloth. Greasy, stringy hair hung down to his shoulders, and he definitely needed some profound dental work.

"Good evening," he said in a friendly voice. "Thank you for your time this evening. My name is Blarto and I have an offer for you..."

"Now wait a minute," Mac cut him off. "What's going on here? Is this a dream or some stupid trick?"

"Neither!" the troll exclaimed with a partially toothy smile. "It's a special form of telemarketing. Remember that fantasy novel you bought with mom's credit card a few months back?"

"Yeah, I bought it," Mac admitted. "I must've been going through a geek phase, buying a book. Didn't read it. Too many words over two syllables."

"Right," the troll agreed enthusiastically. "Well, that put you on our firm's list and we're trying to discover the best way to serve you. May I tell you about the fine offer we think you won't be able to refuse?"

"Uh, sure." Mac said. "Would you mind sitting on the floor? My mom will have a fit if you get the bed dirty."

The troll settled on the floor. "I fully

ligent conversation. You'll love them."

It sounded too good to be true. Mac knew there had to be a catch. "Wait a minute. How do you eat? Don't you have to work to get food and other things?"

"No way! We just steal our food and stuff." Blarto closed his eyes, obviously basking in his memories of past raids. The crusty edges of his mouth curled in a smile. "Now sometimes they catch us in the act, but we just run away like the spineless slime that we are. But you know what, as we run, we yell dirty words at them."

No work? Dirty words? Mac couldn't believe his ears. "What kind of people would want to become trolls?"

"You'd be surprised how many take us up on the offer. That band you're listening too, White Zombie Blowfish? All those guys are really untalented trolls."

Tears were coming to Mac's eyes. He couldn't believe his luck, to be a troll, to live a quality life like White Zombie Blowfish. Only one problem remained: he would never get even with Fitzpatrick.

"And we're very popular among young people," the troll continued. "Ask your teachers. I bet they are seeing more and more of our worthless selves every year in their classrooms."

Mac decided that tomorrow Fitzpatrick would see yet another.

✱



understand. Parents can be such a drag, expecting us to follow unenlightened hygienic practices. Now you'll love my world. You'll be one of the best trolls ever."

"So you're saying trolls don't have to clean up after themselves?" Mac liked the sound of the place. "I bet they don't have to study, either."

"Right, Mac. We just wallow in our own filth and ignorance. You'd love it."

"How about, you know, girls?"

The troll scratched his warty chin. "Now I'll be honest with you, troll women aren't much to look at. But they're wonderful, just like one of the guys, and they don't even expect intel-

JOHN FREDERICKS and his wife Sharon, a graduate student in chemistry, live in Pittsburgh, PA. Although he is a high school chemistry teacher, John is no where near as mean as Fitzpatrick. His hobbies include photography, guitar, and trying to exceed the critical mass of his house with science fiction collectibles. "Opportunity Scratches" is his first professional sale.

KAJA FOGGIO has been making Official Fantasy Art since 1993, when she began work on Wizards of the Coast's wildly popular card game, Magic the Gathering. She lives in Seattle, but travels the world looking for good food and shiny things to bring home to her nest. You can see more of her work by visiting her website at www.studiofoglio.com.

Artwork by Kaja Foglio

SKERRIES

by Jon C. Crusoe

It was a cold September evening, cold even for the Irish coast, when James Robertson first heard Tommy Flynn sing. And *that* only happened because Robertson was on the run.

He was a travel writer — at least part of the time — and had been traveling around the Irish countryside. He was researching two books for two different publishers, one in Scotland and one in the States. Each publisher thought that *he* had exclusive rights to Robertson's next book, and so each of them was picking up the full tab for Robertson's vacation.

Everything had been going pretty well until each publisher sent someone to find him, and the two editors ran into each other in Dublin airport. It turned out that they had been roommates in college and so they wound up comparing notes over coffee. Robertson

made it out of the hotel just ahead of publisher's vengeance in the form of Angie Torrence and Shana MacDonald, and ran, they said, like a thief.

That was an insult and just plain wrong. Robertson may have been a bit of a con man, and a bit of a rogue, with a dash of libertine thrown in for luck, but he wasn't a thief. After all, he had never *promised* exclusivity to anyone.

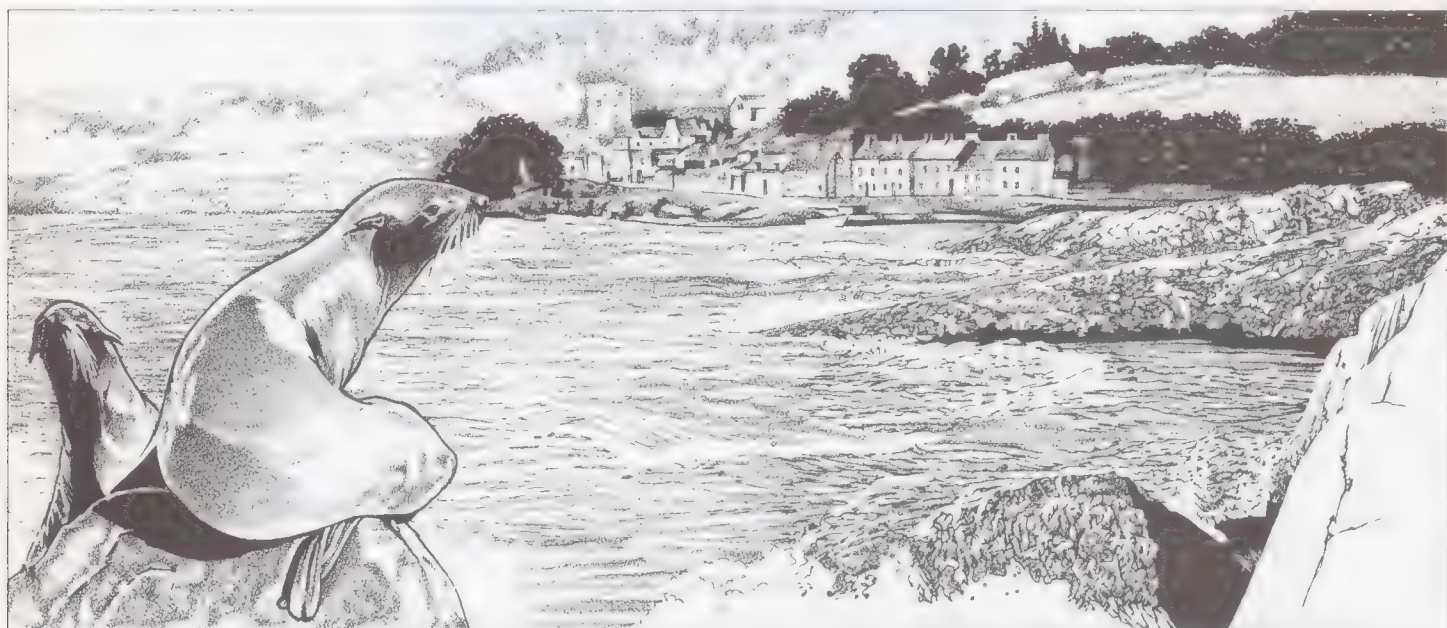
Robertson worked his way up the coast until he reached the seaside village of Skerries and found a place called Woodsvue Farm up in the hills. He parked himself there for a week with Joe and Mary Clanton, and actually worked on the books. But when the weekend rolled around, Robertson wanted to relax. So Joe Clanton guided him down narrow Balbriggan Street to the Schooner Pub. There was music there every Saturday, Joe told him, and

it was *always* the best place to hear traditional Irish music. Once the pub's lit sign came into view, Joe said goodnight and turned up the road for home.

When Robertson reached the pub's heavy door, open in spite of the night air, he had to squint to see inside because all of the ceiling lamps in the back were off. All except one, left on to make a dim spotlight over a gray-haired man tuning an old guitar and crooning to it in Gaelic.

Robertson finally stumbled his way to the bar and ordered a Guinness, letting the bartender take his time with the black, foaming brew. "So, when does the entertainment begin?" he asked as he took the pint.

"American are you? Then you'd be the writer fellow who's stayin' up at the Woodsvue?" At the affirming nod,



Artwork by Michael Kucharski

the barkeep wiped a nonexistent spill and pointed at the man with the guitar. "Well, when Tommy Flynn finishes his tunin', then you'll be hearin' something to write about."

Robertson took a long drink of the creamy stout. "He's that good? With the traditional songs as well?"

"Friend, I would have him in here the year round if I could. But Tommy only comes around in the Fall and leaves before the Spring." The man tried to hide a worried look. "And he does the common songs right enough. But he also does older songs — beautiful songs, 'tis true — but songs that none have heard before. And Father O'Malley says that one of them, a song that Flynn has been singin' here for years, is the same as was translated from the Ogham on a stone north of the Hill of Slaine."

"Okay, he liked it and put it to music — so?"

"So," frowned the bartender. "The stone I'm speakin' of was only found last year. And no one," he waved the rag for emphasis, "even knew before what Flynn had been singin', because he sang it in a Gaelic that's not even been *spoke* in centuries."

"Now *that's* interesting," smiled Robertson. He leaned against the bar and took a sip of the rich, black Guinness. "I think, friend, that I just may have come to the right place after all." Any other thoughts that he might have voiced were stopped by the first notes from Tommy Flynn's guitar.

As Robertson sat amazed, the musician began singing something more than just a song. It spoke of the sea, the sailors, the birds, all and everything that lives there. Now and again, a strain would catch Robertson, almost reminding him of something he couldn't quite name. Then the song changed again and again while the writer sat there motionless until it ended and another began.

The last note of Flynn's set echoed through the pub and Robertson shook himself back to the present. His glass, with one sip missing, sat where he had left it on the bar three-quarters of an hour before. He picked it up, still dazed at what he had heard, and looked at the smiling man behind the bar.

"Don't be worryin' now. The first time folks hear Tommy's music, they sort of get took up by it."

"Dear Lord!" Robertson took several large swallows of his Guinness. "I never

expected... I mean, how *could* I have expected something like that? And he's been hiding here in *Skerries*?" He drained the glass and handed it back to the bartender. "Fill it up again. If the same thing happens every time Flynn sings, I'd better do my drinking between sets."

"You're not going to have to worry about drinking anything ever again, Robertson," came an angry female voice behind him. "You're dead meat, boy."

"You're nae escaping from us again, Jimmy." The other voice, equally female, had a definite Scottish burr to it.

Robertson froze in a standing crouch, half off his stool. Slowly, carefully, he turned to find Angie Torrence and Shana MacDonald standing right behind him. A quick look showed that he had no way to break and run, so he decided to brazen it out.

"Angie, love. And Shana too? Well, it's good to see the pair of you. What the hell are you two doing in *Skerries*?"

The editors sat on the stools flanking Robertson's, and Torrence gently took his arm in a grip like steel. "You've been working out, Angie," he gasped.

"You know what we're doing here, James. It's about the promised rights to your new book."

"Books, sweetheart. I'm writing *two* books — one for you and one for Shana here."

"Tw-Twa books?" stammered MacDonald. "But you naever said anything about twa books."

Robertson grinned, "I didn't have to, Shana. It wasn't in the contract."

"But we have the exclusive on..."

"No, you don't," Robertson interrupted Torrence. He went on to explain, "I might not be an agent, but I *do* know contracts. *Neither* of you get my only book this year. So have a drink on my very generous expense accounts and enjoy the music."

"The wicked man's caught us, Angie." MacDonald looked up from the contract she'd pulled from her briefcase. "There's nae mention in mine of an exclusive book."

"Rats," grumped Torrence. "I guess that means we can't kill him." She turned to the waiting bartender and smiled. "Tully and ice, friend — on the big spender's tab."

"And a neat Glenfiddich for me," said her friend. "And what is this thief talking about music?"

"I'm guessing that it's me he's speaking of," came Flynn's mellow voice

from behind them. Shana MacDonald glanced over her shoulder and grinned in delight at what she saw. From his expression, the singer was equally impressed with the red-haired MacDonald. He quietly smiled and slid onto the stool next to her. "If the three of you are wanting to keep on with your fighting, I can always be waiting to start my singing."

"Nae," gasped the flustered MacDonald, as Robertson and Torrence looked on with amusement. "I'd nae be stopping a braw lad like you from singing." She blushed and looked around to see her companions laughing. "Stop that!" she hissed and reddened even more.

Flynn took MacDonald's hand and kissed it lightly. "Then, miss, with your permission, it's you that I'll be dedicating the next set to." He gave her back her hand and walked over to his stool under the single light at the rear. "The next piece I'm playing," he announced, "is an old love song."

The Irishman began singing and, as both MacDonald and Torrence sat enthralled, Robertson slipped the bartender a hundred punt note. He leaned over the bar and whispered, "Just keep everybody's glass full from that, friend. Flynn's too, if he'll join us. But the important thing is to keep the ladies happy, if you get my meaning."

"So it's drunk you'll be tryin' to get them?" The pub owner winked knowingly. "And be sure that I have a room upstairs if you'll be needin' it for your fun."

"Hell, no!" Robertson sneered in disgust. "I don't want *that*. I just want to keep the two of them smashed so they don't kill me."

Despite his protestation, Robertson awoke fully dressed, with the wind howling through the opened window of what was definitely *not* his room at the farm. He fought his way to his feet and looked out through the morning rain to cobblestoned Balbriggan Street below. He groaned and staggered back to sit on the bed.

Leaning back, he became tangled in a blanket that was draped over a rope strung the length of the bed, dividing it in half. The light line gave way and he collapsed, still fighting the blanket, onto the bed's other occupant.

"Get off of me, you maniac," came Angie Torrence's voice from under the covers. "Come on, Shana, let me sleep."

I've got a headache like you wouldn't believe."

"I'd believe it, all right," said Robertson as he managed to get himself free of the snarled comforter. "I've got the matching one."

There was a sudden flurry as Torrence fought to get her head out from under the bedclothes. She saw Robertson next to her and ducked back to look at herself. She popped out again and snarled, "You're damned lucky I'm still dressed. If I thought for one minute that you'd dragged me up here to..."

"Ah," moaned Robertson, rocking back and forth and holding his head. "Angie, take it easy — and quiet, okay?" He turned a bleary eye in her direction. "Mind you, I'll admit that I've had my fantasies about the two of us from time to time, but I don't think I was capable of anything but sleep last night."

Torrence answered with a half-giggle, "I think that was all either of us could have managed, James." She stretched and asked, "Do you have any idea where Shana is?"

"The last thing I remember about Shana is her sitting in Tommy Flynn's lap and the two of them singing some very, very old song — in *harmony*, no less."

"That's my girl Shana. Want to bet she got lucky last night?"

Robertson shook his head and regretted it instantly. After the room settled down again, he fought his way back to his feet and complained, "Look, if I don't get some coffee in me, the two of you can compare notes at my funeral about who got lucky. Come on."

They started down the hallway when a door burst open and Shana MacDonald ran out crying. Tommy Flynn could be seen inside, throwing clothes into a seabag and cursing.

"Go after her, Angie," said Robertson quietly. "I think I'd better talk to Flynn."

"Men!" was Torrence's disgusted reply before she hurried after her friend.

Flynn was searching through the dresser drawers and didn't even know Robertson was there as he stepped inside the room and shut the door. As the American started forward, something caught his eye. He bent down and picked up what looked like a tanned fur. At least it was some kind of animal skin. "This what you're looking for, Tommy?"

Startled, Flynn jumped erect. He looked at the fur in Robertson's hand and growled, "You'd best be giving me

that, Jamie boy. I'll not be patient with anyone's interfering with me this morning."

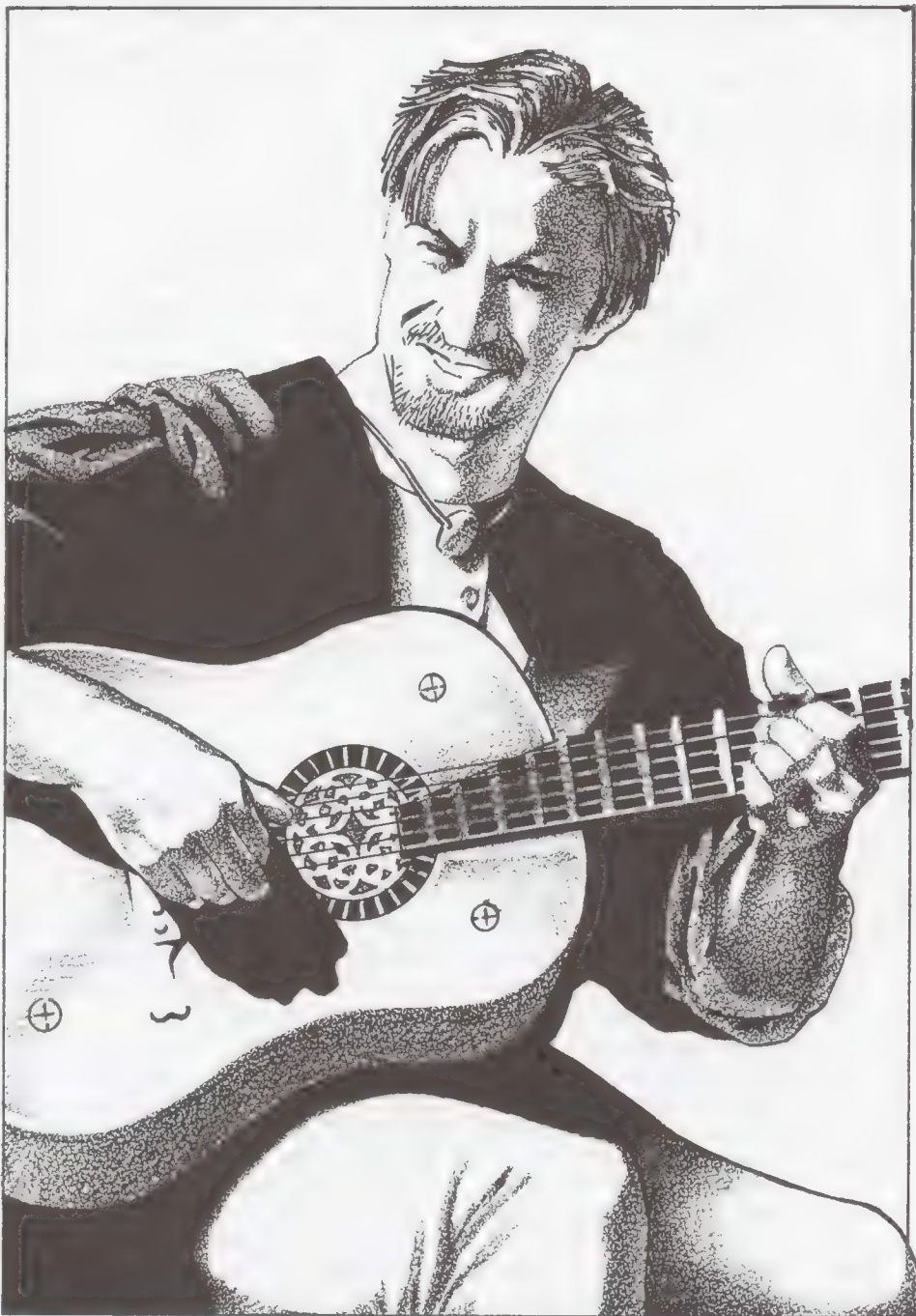
"Sure, Tommy, I'll give it to you in exchange for the answer to one question." Robertson's voice grew hard. "What the hell happened with you and Shana? The way you two hit it off last night, I was expecting to have to find a preacher."

The anger cleared from Flynn's face to be replaced by a look of sadness. "Priest you mean, Jamie. But I'm no Christian anyway." The big man sighed, "I love her, friend, more than you can be knowing. And that's why I

can't be with her. It's not fair to her for me to stay and... It's just not fair to either of us." He shoved a last shirt into the bag and held out his hand. "Now if you'll be giving me what you're holding, I'll be on my way."

Robertson handed over the piece of fur and stood aside. He followed Flynn down to the bar, where the singer took part of his pay in a bottle of whiskey and disappeared into the rain.

Angie and Shana were at a corner table, the latter still crying when Robertson walked up. She looked up at his approach and tried to smile. "So it's gaine he is noo, is it?"



Artwork by Michael Kucharski

Robertson nodded and sat down. "I don't know what's going on, Shana, but Tommy's pretty torn up about it too."

He was interrupted by the door crashing open and Joe Clanton yelling for the pub's owner.

"And what are *you* bellowin' for?" said the man, coming out of the back.

"Oh, sweet Jesus, Seamus. It's *all* the lifeboat crew that's being called. Clancy's boat's gone on the rocks off Colt Island with six aboard, and the storm's getting worse."

Robertson got up as the two men ran out the door. "You two stay here. I'm going to see if I can help."

"No way! Come on, Shana." Torrence pulled MacDonald to her feet. "We'll *all* see if we can help."

Skerries quay was crowded as they arrived. They watched as the lifeboat was rolled out of its house into the surging surf. It had reached the end of its track when another fishing boat, running for the safety of the harbor, rounded the seawall and smashed into it, capsizing and driving it underwater. The harbor was suddenly filled with the lifeboat's crewmen, their orange lifejackets keeping them afloat in the cold water.

Joe Clanton appeared at Robertson's side as the last man was being helped from the water. "They're trying to shoot a line out to the boat from the point over on Red Island," he muttered. "But the wind's against them."

As Clanton led the trio down the road onto Red Island, Robertson glanced over at the old Martello tower that once had guarded the bay. The door had been pried open and he thought he could just see Tommy Flynn's seabag laying inside it. He was thinking about pointing it out to MacDonald when they reached the point on the eastern tip of the island. The rain was slashing down harder and they could barely make out the grounded boat across the bay. A booming noise drew their attention to where a group of men clustered around a mortar set up near a covered shelter. They could see the rope snaking out from near the base of the line-gun, only to be caught by the wind and fall far short of its target.

"It's a good two hundred meters out to Clancy," said Joe Clanton. "They're not going to be able to get a line to him before the boat breaks up."

"Can't the fishermen get off in their

lifeboat or something?" asked Torrence.

"Nae in sae rough a sea." For the first time since they had arrived, Shana MacDonald spoke up. "Enough! I'm nae going tae stand here and watch good men die." She pulled away from Torrence and strode down the spray-wet walkway to the point, stripping off her clothes as she went.

"James, stop her. She's gone crazy," screamed Torrence as she tried to follow and slipped.

Robertson and Clanton hurried after MacDonald, but just before they reached her she threw the looped end of the heavy tow cable into the water and unfolded a small piece of animal skin. She put it on her head and the entire crowd gasped as it seemed to spread over her body and the naked woman began to change. With a harsh barking sound from a sharpened muzzle, she dropped to the ground as her legs first shortened, then disappeared into flippers. The crowd watched, unable to move, as the large gray seal slid off the rocks into the bay.

The bruised Torrence reached Robertson and breathed, "God Almighty. What did she do?"

"A Selkie! The lass is a Selkie," said a stunned Clanton. "One of the seal folk who become human on the land." He looked at the cable feeding out through the water. "See that? She's swimming the rope out to Clancy." He shook his head. "I've heard the stories all my life, but never thought them to be true."

They scanned the water for a few moments before Torrence asked, "Is it my imagination, or is she slowing up?"

They looked at the cable, which *had* slowed where it was feeding into the water. "It must be the current dragging at the line," Joe groaned. "It may be that she doesn't have the strength to pull it all the way out."

Robertson had been standing there trying to put everything together, when he suddenly laughed and broke away from Torrence to begin running for the Martello tower across the road.

He kicked a remaining board out of the door frame and found Flynn passed out in a corner. He grabbed the larger man and dragged him under a stream of water falling from a hole in the roof. Sputtering and swinging blindly, Flynn fought his way back to semi-consciousness.

"Now why did you go and wake me, Jamie boy?" The big Irishman wiped his dripping face and grumbled, "I'd

just managed to drink enough to forget Shana and you have to be spoiling it for me."

Robertson shook him again. "Get up, Flynn!" he shouted. "There's a boat on the rocks and she's trying to swim a rope out to them."

"Who's trying to swim a rope? And to *who*? What the devil are you talking about, man?"

"Shana's trying to swim a rope out to a wrecked fishing boat in the bay. Damn it, Flynn, pay attention."

Flynn tried to climb to his feet, still unsteady on the wet floor. "She can't be doing *that*," he said. "She's not got the strength for — What are you doing, man?" he objected, feeling Robertson pawing through his pockets.

Robertson gave a cry of triumph and held up the folded piece of sealskin he had seen earlier. He laughed and waved the skin like a madman. "You're right, buddy. One Selkie can't pull that rope out by herself, but *two* Selkies might be able to."

"Two? Jamie, you're telling me that Shana is..."

"Flippers and all, Flynn. Now get out there and help her."

Flynn snatched the skin from Robertson and raced out into the rain. Staggering and slipping, he made his way across the road and bulled his way through the crowd to the point. When he reached the pile of Shana's clothes, he roared, "Hang on, darling. Flynn's on the way."

Ripping his clothes off, he threw his skin cap on his head and dove into the surf, half-changed even before he hit the water. A few seconds later, the thick hawser began sizzling through the water and the watchers could see a pair of gray seals breaking the surface for air, their heads close together in the rope's loop.

"By God, they're going to make it," grinned Robertson as the Selkies reached the fishing boat with the lifeline.

The crowd of villagers started cheering as the boat's crew used the rope as a safety line and launched their life rafts. The cheers continued as the first raft, escorted by the seal that had been Tommy Flynn, reached the shore. People swarmed onto the rocks and into the water to help the fishermen ashore. The second raft beached and the Selkies turned away from land and headed for the open sea. Two days later, the town was swarming with me-



Artwork by Michael Kucharski

dia crews.

"I swear, Joe, if I had seen that tourist taping the rescue, I'd have broken his camcorder." Robertson knocked back his glass of Tullamore Dew and signaled Seamus the bartender for another. "Now the idiots are even going out to the seal herds in small boats. They keep trying to get interviews, for God's sake."

"Well, that's stopping as of right now," said Torrence as she came into the pub. "The mayor has just declared the herds off-limits. He told the press that this is a by-God seal sanctuary and they'd better not bother the poor beasts anymore. And since he and every other resident of the village are denying that *anything* happened, I think that the media sharks will wind up saying that the tape was some kind of a hoax and leave Skerries for good."

"And it's none too soon for me," was Joe Clanton's only comment.

The next year, the villagers of Skerries didn't go out to Red Island on the night of the herd's return. Instead, they gathered along the harbor and on the quay, staying away out of respect for James and Angie Robertson, the Clantons and a few others who gathered around a fire built under Red Is-

land shelter.

James carried a crock emblazoned: *Give every man his Dew*, and Angie held a bottle of Scotch. The Clantons had brought robes and blankets. And Seamus had locked the doors of the Schooner Pub and sat under the shelter cradling the guitar that had hung behind his bar the rest of the year.

"Are you sure it's the right herd that Clancy spotted yesterday, Joe?" asked Robertson, as he scanned the dark waters.

"As sure as I can be," was Clanton's laconic reply. "One seal herd looks remarkable like another."

It was then that the lookout atop the lifeboat station sounded the siren to let everyone know that the herd was in sight. Leaping and splashing through the phosphorescent waters of the Irish Sea, the gray seals returned to their winter home. And as the siren died, the people became hushed on the quay and began listening, all of them hoping to hear Tommy Flynn's music ring over the harbor of Skerries again.



JON C. CRUSOE lives in Tallahassee, Florida, where he is owned by a gray tomcat named Jasper. A native of the area, he has worked as a zookeeper, a museum guide, a taxi driver, and for

the last twenty-four years, a rescue paramedic. When not busy with the above occupations, Jon devotes his time to collecting edged weapons, books, art, and unusual beer mugs (preferably full). Other hobbies include blacksmithing and shark-fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. And when he finally sits down, Jon finds relaxation in old movies or well-read books. Having said (more than once) that if he didn't have the wasteful habit of sleeping, he would find something else to do, Jon has been forced to prove his words since he began writing. Now, late at night, his neighbors wonder at the strange sounds of frenzied typing that come from the single lit window of the Crusoe home.

MICHAEL KUCHARSKI has worked as a professional illustrator and graphic artist in the advertising and journalism fields for nearly two decades. His work has appeared in such diverse forms as book covers, game boxes, calendars, medical illustrations, and posters as well as magazine illustrations for sf publications such as *Midnight Zoo* and *Pandora* and various non-sf magazines. He has won the Cauldron on several occasions. In recent years he has begun showing his work in art shows at science fiction conventions. Michael lives in Wyandotte, Michigan.

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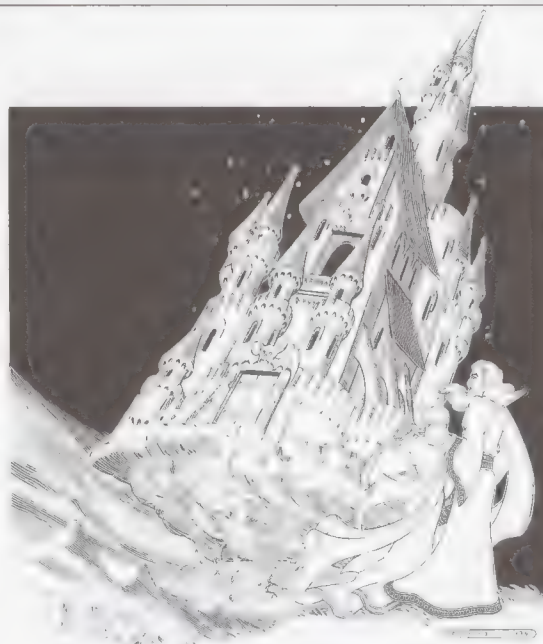
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Temple of Stone

Leah Suslovich

The priestesses walked through the temple in single rank, knowing that one of them was to be selected for the sacrifice at noon. Their faces were tight and pale; fear flickered visibly in the eyes of some. Yet their steps never faltered, and the line moved smoothly on, past the still and silent Stone that lay on the altar in the center of the temple.

When the chosen sacrifice of the day passed, the Stone would glow briefly with a soft white light. Each girl — none of them older than sixteen — could not help but stare at the Stone out of the corner of her eye, like a bird unable to look away from a snake.

And each of them grappled with a choice. It was not an official choice, but it was a choice nonetheless — a way to avoid the deadly Stone. Every day, a few girls would take that choice and deliberately stumble, fall, interrupt the smooth walk of the priestesses. Punishment would be quick and harsh: fifty lashes, delivered in the small 'whipping room' at the far end of the temple. But there was also a reward: the knowledge that today, at least, they would not face possible death.

Most of the priestesses chose to take their chances with the Stone. Fifty lashes were not an easy thing to endure. There were a few who fell every day; they lived in unending pain, clinging grimly to life. Some of the priestesses never fell; they believed that the

Stone's choice was always right, and that the truly righteous must submit. Most of the girls, though, made a different choice every time they faced the Stone.

Only one of the priestesses did not fit into any of the three categories. She walked along calmly, at ease, without a trace of agony showing in her dark eyes. For Sarli had a secret: she *knew* whom the Stone would choose.

Before the Stone glowed, a split-second before the Chosen stepped up in front of it, it emitted a soft, bell-like tone. When Sarli was very young, she'd realized that no one but she could hear the sound, and had been quick to see the advantages of it. She had never fallen — not even once — since she began joining the ceremony at the age of five. As a result of her perfect record, she would soon become a high priestess, even though she was only fourteen. When she was a high priestess, there would be no more fear and no more risk. She would be one of the sacrificers, not one of the sacrificed.

In the Temple of the Snake-God, that was a good thing.

She became so involved in dreaming about her promotion that the bell-like sound of the Stone came as a shock, jerking her out of her reverie. And it was with even more shock and confusion that she saw that there were no priestesses in front of her, and that she

was about to walk, *herself*, in front of the Stone.

Her mind refused to function. But all the restless nights of fearing this, of planning what to do if it happened, came to her aid. Her feet stopped moving of their own volition; her body fell forward, her arms coming out to catch her. It was a clumsy fall, obviously planned. The other girls did it much more subtly. But she had managed it before the Stone could glow, marking her as victim.

Instantly, two high priestesses were by her side, jerking her roughly to her feet. Sarli let them, unable to think. The stone walls and ceiling of the temple whirled around her. She had seen the marks of the whip on some girls' backs, heard the hoarse screams echoing through the passageways, and she knew she couldn't bear it. Never in her life had she felt serious pain.

Her pride kept her lips pressed together, prevented her from useless pleading as the two high priestesses half-dragged her through the passageways. But when she saw the stark white slab that was the whipping table, her control deserted her and she began to struggle. The high priestesses, emotionless, forced her onto the table and strapped down her arms and legs. One of them selected a whip and stood over her, eyes cold and pitiless.

Sarli began to scream even before the



Artwork by Armand Cabrera

first lash fell.

Back aching from the scars of her punishment, face streaked with tears, Sarli stood beside the Stone in the silent interior of the Temple. Her hands were trembling, despite the dull grief of acceptance that had settled within her. She knew full well what would happen when she passed the Stone; and in the bell-like tone that had already sounded, she heard her fate.

It was night, and the sorcerous lights that illuminated the temple were dimmed. The lights marked night and day for the priestesses, and were the only way they had of marking time. The Temple of the Snake-God was underground, carved into a stony mountain, and the only access to the outside world was through the twisted, convoluted passageways that only the high priestesses dared travel. Getting lost in those passageways would mean a slow death of thirst, alone and lost in the darkness. The quick slash of the sacrifice knife would be easier.

Reluctantly, Sarli walked in front of the Stone; its answering glow confirmed her fears. She had noticed before that the Stone never relinquished its victims. There were many priestesses who had panicked right before they stepped in front of the Stone, and had fallen there as she had. But if the Stone had already sounded their death, there was no escape. The next time they passed the Stone, no matter how long it took them to tire of the pain and choose to take the risk, the Stone would glow for *them*.

And now there was no escape for Sarli, either.

She knew she couldn't face the lash again; surely she would go mad if she did. Her back was throbbing with pain, a constant reminder of what it meant to avoid the Stone. Yet the thought of herself bound on the killing altar, with the knife descending on her throat, was just as unbearable. And death in the passageways was a nightmare; better the killing altar than that.

She was trapped.

Despair welled up within her, yet a stubborn sense of self-preservation forced her to move away from the altar, before the Stone's light alerted somebody. If she was found here, alone, at night, when she should have been in her bed in the priestesses' quarters, a whipping would be the least she could expect. But she had to come here; she had to know for sure.

And now she did.

I was so close! A month more, even less than that, and she would have been a high priestess, free of the Stone's threat forever. But she would never become a high priestess now, not if she fell every day rather than undergo the Stone's choice.

Even being a high priestess did not really appeal to her; but it was the only future she had that was any future at all. She had been trapped all her life. The cage had just grown smaller.

Sarli took a deep breath, then lifted the sacrifice knife from the altar.

No godly fire struck her for that sacrilege; the walls of the temple did not shake or crumble, and the Stone did not flare up in outrage. Relieved, Sarli moved away from the Stone and began to walk across the stone floor, her blue tunic hanging to her knees and her bare feet making scarcely a sound. She had never been as devout as some of the other priestesses; now, under the threat of death, her faith had fallen from her completely. Yet it was still hard to do what she was about to do, to transgress so shockingly that no one else would even dream of it.

She came to a stop before the red curtain that covered the entrance to the inner sanctum. The holiest of holies, where the spirit of the Snake-God dwelt, where the corpses of the sacrificed were thrust every day. Not even the high priestesses entered here. But Sarli was desperate. It was the only place in the temple where she'd never been; the only place where there might be some slim chance of escape. Perhaps the only way out of the trap was in the deepest part of it. And if not ... well, she still had the sacrifice knife. It might be easier to use it on herself, if she had the courage.

Forcing her chaotic thoughts to be still, Sarli swept aside the curtain and stepped inside.

She was not in the inner sanctum yet; another red curtain hid it from her. But standing in the space between the two curtains was a high priestess in a white tunic, her eyes wide in shock as she stared at Sarli. Her mouth opened, and she drew in a deep breath, ready to scream and alert the temple to the desecrator.

Sarli's mind stopped functioning completely. She flung herself at the high priestess bodily, knocking her to the ground. The knife in her hand flashed, and then the high priestess

cried out, but too low for anyone to hear, and her cry ended in a gurgle.

Sarli crouched on the floor, breathing hard, staring in disbelief at the still face of the high priestess, at the bright red blood that covered her side and filled a spreading pool on the floor. The knife handle stuck out from the midst of all the blood; Sarli forced herself to grab it, to wrench it out of the high priestess's flesh. The blade was dripping blood.

She had murdered. She had killed one of her jailers, true, someone who had no doubt used the sacrifice knife many times; but that didn't matter. It was the blasphemy more than the death that horrified her. In the temple, priestesses died every day; but never a high priestess, and never like this.

The blood-soaked high priestess stirred suddenly, and her eyelids fluttered. Sarli backed away, her hand tightening on the knife hilt, and she had to control the urge to plunge it into the woman's neck and end it. The high priestess was no danger to her; she certainly wouldn't be able to manage a scream. Killing her might actually be an act of mercy, but Sarli thrust the thought away. She turned her back on the dying woman, jerked the red curtain aside, and stepped into the inner sanctum.

The roof ended abruptly; the walls of the inner sanctum rose higher and higher, endlessly. It seemed to Sarli that she could feel a waft of cold air from above, coming in from the outside world. The sanctum was in shambles; the walls were scored with deep, wide scratches, and the floor was covered with rubble. There was no light, except what came in from the now open curtain. It took a few moments before Sarli's eyes adjusted to the light; and then, to her horror, she saw a huge, sinuous shape creeping over the rubble toward her. Two beady red eyes focused on her, behind a mouth that gaped to reveal long fangs and a forked, flickering tongue.

The Snake-God!

With a whimper of horror, Sarli fell to her knees. She had been wrong, horribly wrong; now she would be punished for it, and the Snake-God would kill her Himself. She threw herself forward onto her face, not wanting to see the horrible God rearing above her, waiting for His fangs to strike.

"No!"

The cry, hoarse and weak, made Sarli

look up. It had come from behind her; she turned to see that the wounded high priestess had managed to drag herself to the open curtain. "Get away!" the high priestess gasped out. "Don't — let him —"

Sarli scrambled to her feet, running to the other side of the inner sanctum, stumbling over the rubble. The huge snake turned to follow her, scales slithering over the stones.

"It's the Snake-God!" Sarli screamed at the high priestess, her terror mounting.

With an obvious effort, the high priestess spoke again. "No. It's a — wyrm, a baby dragon. It —" She stopped, coughing blood.

Uncomprehending, Sarli looked from the giant snake to the high priestess and back to the snake. A baby dragon? Legends told of dragons who had lived long ago, slaughtering humanity by the hundreds and ravaging the earth. Then they had disappeared, leaving for nobody-knew-where, but leaving humanity behind to rebuild from the ruins. "A wyrm?" she whispered.

"One of them — didn't leave with the rest," the high priestess gasped. "It was too young. Wyrms can only become dragons after they have made their first kill; then they can grow their wings, breathe their fire. They can't be killed."

She had to stop, out of breath. But Sarli knew the rest. It made horrible

sense. "So you trapped it," she said, beginning to back away from the wyrm. "You brought it here, and made sure it would never reach maturity, never make its first kill. And the — the — sacrifices. You feed it —"

"We have to," the high priestess whispered. "Otherwise, it would grow desperate enough to break the wards that keep it here. It doesn't understand — as long as we keep it fed, it doesn't know it's caged —"

"No," Sarli said slowly. "It knows."

She could not have said how she knew; but it seemed to her that she could read the dragon's thoughts in its glowing red eyes, as though there was a link between them. The link of two trapped creatures?

"How long has it been here?" she demanded.

"Thousands of years."

Thousands ... Sarli's mind shrank, unable to comprehend it. To be trapped, caged, for thousands of years ...

"If it's released, it will be the end," the high priestess said urgently. "The end of civilization, of humanity ... it'll destroy us all. It must hate us"

"I don't blame it," Sarli spat. "I hate you."

"If it was not trapped, it would destroy all mankind"

"Oh, of course," Sarli said. "It's a small price to pay, killing girls every day — girls stolen from the surface —"

"Not stolen!" the high priestess said. "They're left on the mountainside for us. Unwanted female children, illegitimates, orphans"

The wyrm was too close. Sarli ran past it, as fast as she could, to the other end of the sanctum. Too slowly, the wyrm turned its head to follow her.

"You must leave," the high priestess begged. "If it kills you, it's all ruined."

Once again, something seemed to flash between the mind of the wyrm and the mind of the priestess. "I can't," Sarli said. "It'll follow me. It'll break the wards. It's too strong"

"Then you must kill yourself to prevent it!" the high priestess commanded. "Don't let it flee!"

Shaking her head desperately, Sarli moved farther from the wyrm. "No. There must be a way"

The high priestess tried to say something. Her face twisted in agony, and her head dropped to the ground.

The wyrm was growing angry; it hissed at her and plunged forward with sudden, surprising speed. Sarli darted out of the way, almost too late, dropping the knife. The wyrm followed, and Sarli ran. The sanctum was too small, she thought; she couldn't avoid the wyrm for long

The wyrm reared up and lunged at her, fangs snapping shut on nothing as Sarli threw herself out of the way. Faster than she would have believed possible,



she ran past the thick body. Not for the opening, because that would have been worse than useless; but for the sacrifice knife lying on the stone floor.

They can't be killed.

Sarli hoped that the high priestess had been wrong about that.

She rushed forward as the wyrm turned and stabbed at its side. The knife made not even a mark on its scaly hide. Desperate, Sarli stabbed again, with all her strength. Then she had to run out of the way as the wyrm reared above her.

I can't kill it. I can't escape.

Trapped again

And again it seemed to her that her mind could touch the wyrm's, that its emotions were her own, only deeper, faster, so much more intense that she couldn't even comprehend it. For thousands of years it had been trapped here, denied its natural freedom, not even understanding what that freedom was. It longed for something, and didn't know what it longed for, and had spent centuries in blind desperation and need for something it didn't comprehend. For it had never known what it was to be a dragon

The wyrm's thoughts, half-mad with desperation, melded with Sarli's own. She sensed awareness in the creature, acknowledgment that their minds were touching; and then it towered up above her and plunged down, fangs white and gleaming.

Shocked into motion, Sarli stumbled to the side; the wyrm thudded to the ground bare inches away. In a move born of desperation, she grabbed its scaly sides and heaved up. Then she was on its long back, clinging to it with one hand while she held the knife with the other.

If I can get to its eyes, and blind it, then maybe I can get away

She crawled up to its head, clinging to the thick hide desperately as the wyrm thrashed in frustration, looking for its prey. The wyrm was surprisingly easy to hold onto, its skin rough and covered with tough hairs. Sarli dragged herself onto its head, holding the knife ready to strike.

And still she could feel its thoughts, its pain and fury. The wyrm screamed silently, unbearably. Sarli raised the knife over one gleaming eye, knowing that the wyrm must be aware of her now — and hesitated, not wanting to strike, waiting one second too long. The wyrm plunged downward violently, and she tumbled off its head,

landing on the rubble far below. Her back exploded in pain.

The wyrm's fangs were right above her — and unbelievably, it, too, hesitated. But Sarli knew it would kill her, just as she would have tried to kill it. The wyrm's mouth opened wider, the fangs came closer — and Sarli threw her knife straight at one glowing eye.

The knife hit the eye point-first, and glanced off, flying across the sanctum. The wyrm was completely unharmed, but it drew back slightly, hissing; and Sarli scrambled out from under its fangs, looking around frantically for the knife.

It had fallen next to the high priestess; and even as Sarli headed for it, the woman raised her head weakly. Blood had stopped flowing from her wound; her lips moved soundlessly, and she stared at Sarli, eyes dark and deep.

Behind her, Sarli *felt* the wyrm's attention shift away from her, focusing on the wounded woman on the floor. It hissed again, and moved forward. Realization entered the high priestess's eyes, and with it fear; not for herself, for she would almost certainly die anyhow, but for what it would mean to humanity when the wyrm killed her.

Her eyes fell on the knife. With an obvious effort of will, she reached for it, grasped it, and turned its point toward herself.

Sarli stood watching, frozen. The wyrm was advancing swiftly, but the knife would reach its target first, and the prisoner would find only a carcass to feed its hunger, not a kill to set it free.

Something snapped in Sarli. Hardly knowing what she was doing, she threw herself forward, grabbing the knife and wrenching it from the high priestess's hand. The woman screamed in denial, and then the wyrm descended and her scream was cut short.

Sarli crouched on the stone floor, holding the knife, the high priestess's shriek ringing in her ears — and then she realized that it was not the woman's scream she was hearing, but a different sound, a roar. She looked up in disbelief as the wyrm reared higher over its kill, roaring in triumph as thousands of years of enforced immaturity were thrust off in seconds. Wings erupted from its body, as the roar erupted from its mouth; it became thicker, smoother, and scaly claws grew from the underside of its body. Then the transformation was complete, and a dragon reared

in the small sanctum, flames spurting from its mouth.

Sarli was caught up in it; linked to the dragon's mind, its wild exultation swept her own thoughts away. She didn't even look at the broken body on the ground; she ran to the dragon, and, since it was linked to her as well, it lowered itself and let her climb onto its back.

The dragon knew now; knew what had been stolen from it, and what freedom meant. Nobody could confine a dragon, not forever, and its time had come. In its freedom, Sarli's own seemed insignificant, though she knew it would matter to her when the dragon left. And it *would* leave; it would follow the other dragons, wherever they had gone. It knew its destination; but Sarli, despite the mind-link, could not even begin to comprehend it. The only thing she could grasp, dimly, was that even the world was not large enough to mean freedom to the dragons.

Then the powerful wings began to beat, and the dragon rose into the air, higher and higher, up past the high walls of its prison. There was no roof, as Sarli had guessed; they rose into the night, both of them seeing the world for the first time since infancy. The wind rushed past, and Sarli clung to the dragon's back as they rose yet higher, flying fast and steeply beneath the stars as the Temple of Stone disappeared behind them.

✱

LEAH SUSLOVICH was born in Brooklyn, New York, on July 5, 1977; she recently graduated from high school. Although she has published stories before, this is her first professional sale. Leah credits her cousin Elissa for pushing her to rewrite and submit this story and notes: "*Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine* was the first magazine I sent it to. Needless to say, when I got the acceptance letter I was ecstatic — and I still am!"

ARMAND CABRERA is a self-taught artist and says, "I've been at it for a million years" — really since 1980. He worked for several years in the computer game field, at Lucas Films on their *STAR WARS* games and at Electronic Arts as a computer artist.

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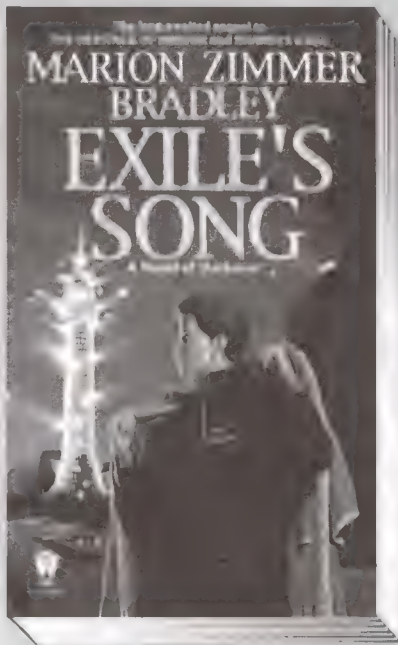
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The Oak King's Wrath

by Laura J. Underwood

The bandits charged out of the forest quite suddenly, and the only warning Anwyn Baldomyre had of their coming was the sudden ring of Glynnanis's magical voice shouting to the young harper's mind. He bolted off

the road, clutching the white harp close, unable to stop long enough to sing one of his spell songs in his own defense. Three men in armor that had seen better days bellowed merrily and gave chase. "Your money or your life!" they

shouted. Anwyn had little of the former left and was not ready to surrender the latter.

A heavy forest of massive oaks surrounded him as he fled. Hopefully, they would afford him a means of escaping

his unruly hosts. The bandits were spreading out, and from the sound of their thrashing through the undergrowth, Anwyn knew they were trying to surround him. By the Four, he needed a place to hide, to collect himself that he might sing the Gate Song. As much as he loathed the thought of going back to where he'd been before just to seek an alternate route, it was better than this fate.

Two days had passed since the last village — three leagues since he left the last farmstead. There, he'd been cautioned about the road going through the forest, and told the next dwelling was a keep at least three days beyond. The farmers suggested he take the road over the mountains, as the woods were rumored to be haunted by spirit folk. Not the first time Anwyn had encountered such tales in his travels through Lamboria. In some cases, the local superstitions had been founded on more human cause. In others...

Even so, Anwyn had no qualms about sleeping in a forest. His father was a gamekeeper, and the young harper had spent much of his childhood camping in the woods of his homeland when he wasn't in Nymbaria Hold entertaining the High Lord his father called master. Besides, with the magical Songs of Power learned from the great mage Rhystar of Far Reach, Anwyn found he could make the outdoor world as comfortable as he pleased — at least once a day. Anwyn had never made the sacrifice to free the power his silver eyes marked him as possessing, though at times like this, he wondered if it would be worth becoming a prisoner of the power just to have his peace of mind.

Anwyn's mad dash took him into a clearing where the oaks grew in a ring around two very ancient trees. One of those had a huge split in its side where the wood was recently splintered outward and showed signs of scorching. He had no time to wonder why. He could hear the bandits closing on him. With a gasp, he crawled into the bole of the tree. Lords and Ladies, don't let this be a bear's lair!

Inside, there was just enough space to house a large man. More than sufficient space for an undersized youth like himself. He squeezed through the gap, and as he touched the wood, Anwyn was struck by the sense that a life had dwelled here. He frowned, pushing red hair from his eyes. Even without making the sacrifice to free his

power, he noticed a growing awareness of all magic in the world. Rhystar often assured the young harper this was not unusual. "In spite of denying your power, you will always be aware," he would say. And Anwyn would sometimes wish it were not so. Like now, for what he felt made his skin tingle warmly.

There was no time to seek another place to hide. Harp tucked to his chest, Anwyn crouched in the bole of the tree, trying to still his ragged breath. None too soon, for a man broke into the clearing and stopped to look around. He was quickly joined by two others. Swords drawn, they glowered at the forest.

The man who appeared to be the leader asked, "Where is he, Thom?"

"Can't have gone far, Riggs," the second groused. "Did you see him, Gant?"

"He didn't get past me," the third swore.

Anwyn bit his lip. Lords and Ladies, why didn't they just go away! Crouched as he was in the hole, his leg muscles were starting to cramp. If I sing the Gate Song now, they'll just stop me before I can get away!

"If you had made your sacrifice to become a real mage..." Glynnanis sang to his mind.

"Shhh!" Anwyn hissed without thinking. In his terror, he'd forgotten only mageborn could hear the harp's ethereal voice. Too late, he saw the three bandits turn in his direction. He froze, praying the shadows were hiding him.

"He's around here somewhere," Riggs said. His gestures sent the other two scurrying off to search while he advanced on the splintered oak. Fear locked Anwyn's senses. What could he do? To bolt now would get him captured. The song was his only hope, but he would have to be quick. He closed his eyes, focusing on a spot where he had stopped back on the road while reaching into his mind for the notes and humming them softly in his throat.

"Anwyn!" Glynnanis shouted.

With a scrape and a thunk, steel drove into the splintered gap, stabbing the heartwood next to Anwyn's head. He gasped, eyes flashing open in time to see a rough hand reach in and seize his tunic. He was dragged up to face a sneer.

"Got you now, pretty lad," Riggs said.

Anwyn opened his mouth to sing when a fist cracked his jaw. The blow

knocked his head back against the core of the tree. He was too stunned to respond to Glynnanis's panicky cries as the harp sack and satchel were wrenched from his grasp. The sword blade jerked free. Anwyn yelped when the hand twisted the front of his tunic and hauled him out of the wooden depths. He was thrown to the ground.

"Shouldn't have run, laddie," Riggs said and raised his sword. "Not that we would have spared you then..."

"Hold!"

That voice echoed like the crack of a limb. Anwyn heard one of his captors curse. He pushed himself up enough to peer towards the rim of the circular grove.

A man stood there, tall and straight. The light of the lowering sun reflected off his face and gave the impression his skin had the smooth grain of polished wood. His cloak and kirtle appeared to be many leaves sewn together, and he wore a wooden crown carved of oak leaves, acorns, and woven twigs.

"Who, by the Black Wind, are you?" Riggs said.

"I am Dair, the Oak King," the man said in his sturdy voice, "and this grove is my domain. Under my laws, it is forbidden to soak the ground here with innocent blood."

Thick brows angled, Riggs looked at each of his partners. "Kill him," he said.

Gant and Thom nodded, deserting Anwyn's possessions to raise swords, and charged across the clearing. Gant was first to reach Dair. Anwyn heard a hearty thwack that knocked Gant's sword aside before a fist cracked the bandit's face and sent him flying. Thom tried to take advantage of the distraction, only to be seized by the arm. Anwyn winced when he heard bone snap as the arm was twisted back. The bandit screamed until Dair's fist drove down like a club, smashing the bandit's skull. Thom fell, and Dair's glower fixed firmly on the bandit leader.

"By the Four!" Riggs hissed and bolted for the edge of the clearing. Gant staggered to his feet and followed. Thom did not move at all, staring at the branches that created a canopy overhead.

Anwyn pushed himself into a sitting position, leaning against the broken trunk. Dair's bewitching gaze settled on the trembling harper. Lords and Ladies, what will he do to me? Dair stiffly walked past the remaining

bandit's corpse. He crouched, and Anwyn gasped.

"You are made of wood!" he said in surprise.

Dair cracked a slight smile. "Aye. As I told them, I am the Oak King. And you, young harper mage, have you a name?"

"I'm..." he started to deny his magical heritage, only to pause. "I'm Anwyn Baldomyre."

Dair bobbed his head respectfully. "You and your living wood are welcome to my grove," he said. "My Queen and my knights all welcome you as well." He gestured to the second oak, then to the circle of trees, and rose once more to tower like a tree himself.

Anwyn froze, for he realized he could sense life in all these trees. And if he closed his eyes, he swore he heard voices in the whisper of the wind that passed through their branches. *What is this place?* he wondered.

"A living grove," Glynnanis sang. "My wood came from a place such as this. Living groves are very rare. Once, they could be found in the forests of all the Kingdoms. Now, there are but a few remaining. We were lucky to find this place."

Lucky, indeed, Anwyn thought, though he wasn't sure how.

"Rhystar bargained very hard for the wood that made me," Glynnanis went on, sounding pleased.

"Your harp speaks true," Dair said. "No man may bring an axe to us without paying a boon."

"I see," Anwyn said. "Well...I do thank you for saving my life, but I really should be on my way before night..."

"Wait," Dair said, and his voice stopped Anwyn so he hardly drew a breath. "There is no need to flee. None here will harm you. You who carry a harp of living wood are safe within these bounds. And besides...I have a boon to ask of you now, young harper mage."

"A boon?" Anwyn repeated.

Dair lifted the harp's sercloth sack and the satchel, gently placing them at Anwyn's side. "Being as I have saved your life," the Oak King said, "I will ask you a favor in return."

"What sort of favor?"

"As you are a sorcerer possessed of great magics," Dair said, "I wish to ask you to use those powers to heal my tree." He indicated to the trunk against which Anwyn leaned. "Nearly a

se'ennight ago, lightning struck my tree. I was forced to flee the heartwood in order to live. Fortunately, the rain did not allow the fire to linger, but I have not been able to heal the tree for myself. I must be rooted to the tree again so it and I may continue to live."

"But...I'm not sure I know how to...root you to your tree," Anwyn said.

"As a sorcerer, you must know something of the healing arts."

"Well, I do have the Song of Healing," Anwyn said. "But I don't know if it will work on a tree — even a living tree."

"I ask only that you try," Dair said.

Anwyn shrugged. It was the least he could do, he had to admit. "All right," he said, crawling to his feet. His own limbs were rather sore, and he had several cuts and bruises marring his arms and legs. *No matter,* he thought. *I'll sleep for the night and heal myself tomorrow.*

"But first," Dair said. "My knights must see to that unfortunate's remains."

Raising his hands, he turned his back on Anwyn. The young harper heard a faint rustle of leaves vibrating on the ground as though touched by a gentle breeze. He stared at the body. The soil around it seemed to wriggle with life. Snakelike tendrils pierced the surface, and before his horrified gaze, they wrapped themselves about the body until all that remained was a coffin of roots which sank slowly into the ground.

"All things return to the womb of Earth," Dair said gently. "His flesh will nourish us now."

"You feed on flesh?" Anwyn said, unable to hide his startled expression.

"We consume only that which has died," Dair said, looking back. "We never take the living unless provoked by fire or axe. Fire is our greatest adversary. We fear it above all else."

Anwyn could not repress a shiver. He glanced warily at Glynnanis, wondering if his harp shared such tastes. Dair approached his tree, crawling into the bole.

"Now, harper mage," the Oak King said. "Heal me if you can."

With a nod, Anwyn rested his hands on the trunk of Dair's oak. Closing his eyes, he hummed the notes of his Healing Song, and felt the warm tingle of the magic when it filled him. Anwyn opened his mouth to pitch the notes into the air. A rainbow surrounded him with healing essence, and he willed it

into the living wood. He heard a rich groan as he sang, and opened his eyes when he felt the tree moving under his hands. Splintered shards knitted together, closing over Dair's grateful smile. Ceasing the song, Anwyn drew his hands away from the trunk and stepped back. A mighty oak greeted his gaze.

"Well done, harper mage," Dair's voice spoke to Anwyn's mind. "We will be eternally grateful for your kindness. Now, night draws on, and you may sleep within our grove so long as you light no fire. We will watch over you as best we can."

Anwyn nodded. He was tired, and the sun was slipping away, leaving grim shadows to stretch across the ground. *Here is as good as any place,* he thought, and unrolled the pallet he carried in his satchel to seat himself on the ground beneath Dair and his leafy queen. And though he was tired, he still found the energy to sing forth bread and stew to nourish himself, and to play a few lilt-ing melodies on Glynnanis's golden strings long after darkness cloaked him. The tree limbs seemed to rustle and sway in rhythm with his music.

Exhaustion soon took its toll, and he gladly gave slumber its due, closing his eyes as he rested on his pallet. The ground felt warm beneath him. As comfortable as his father's lap when he was small, it soothed him. He slept for some time, it seemed...

...Until he heard Glynnanis ring out a warning. "Anwyn!" the harp called.

Pressure in the form of a knee thumped into Anwyn's chest, pinning him down. He opened his mouth to cry out, but a hand clamped his throat. In the moonlight that sank towards the horizon and flooded the grove blue-white, steel flashed before his gaze, wavering in front of a wicked grin.

"Well, now," Riggs said. "Where's your royal friend?"

Anwyn's gaze flitted to the oaks overhead. Silent sentinels, they loomed. Riggs glanced that way as well and snorted.

"Looks like he's deserted you," the bandit said. He rose, pulling Anwyn up off his pallet, then shoving him against Dair. The rough bark dug into Anwyn's back. The harper felt the life force in the tree, vibrating like a harp note on his soul. "Gant," Riggs said. "Bring the rope."

Gant chuckled and came forward, brandishing coils of hemp. He tied one

end to Anwyn's wrist, then circled the oak to bind the other. All the while, Riggs's steel stayed close to the young harper's throat. Only when Anwyn was secure did the bandit take a step back.

"What did you do with Thom?" Riggs asked.

"Nothing," Anwyn said, his mouth parched with fear.

"Then where is he?" Riggs said.

Anwyn swallowed. "In the ground."

"You buried him?"

Anwyn shook his head, eyeing the proximity of the dagger. "The...the trees...they...ate him..."

A backhand burnished Anwyn's cheek. He flinched against the oak, his stomach knotting in fear, and blinked the tears that sprang into his eyes. A song. The Gate Song would save him...but he would have to leave Glynnanis behind, and since he touched the tree, it would be damaged by his spell. And that would kill Dair for certain! Anwyn couldn't do that! Couldn't bring himself to harm the living wood just to save himself, no more than he could bear the thought of leaving his magical harp to the care of these evil men.

"Got your handaxe, Gant?" Riggs said.

"Aye," Gant said. "Want me to make collops of the lad?"

"Maybe later," Riggs said. "Right now, I want you to fetch some wood for a fire. Because if this pretty lad don't tell us where the Oak King's gone and what they done with Thom, we're gonna have him for breakfast." He punctuated the threat with a jerk of the dagger, coming uncomfortably close to trimming Anwyn's nose.

"But I told you," Anwyn said weakly, his mind dredging forth all sorts of tortures that they might inflict on him, from the most painful to the most humiliating. "The trees devoured your friend...and Dair has gone back into his tree..."

Another blow struck more harshly than before, rocking his head back against the oak. Eyes closed in pain, he listened as Gant went out of the grove.

"You keep saying that," Riggs said, "and I'll start peeling your skin off by inches!"

Anwyn shuddered, cursing himself for a coward. Rhystar would have dealt with these men with a mere snap of his fingers or a word. Of course, the master of Far Reach had been a soldier in his



Artwork by James Baikovek

youth, before he made his sacrifice and came into his power. He was used to dealing plainly with those who provoked him. Anwyn had been the youngest son, his father's favorite, always protected for his gentle ways. Perhaps if I had a heart of oak...

Gant came back, dropping a pile of deadwood near the center of the grove. He squatted, clearing back leaves and arranging the wood, then drew flint and steel to tinder a flame. The moment his fire flared to life, Anwyn heard the familiar rustle of leaves and popping of soil.

Dair?

Roots suddenly burst out of the ground, entangling Gant. He shrieked as they dragged him towards his own fire as though intent on using him to smother the flames. Riggs gave a shout

and charged in to help Gant. The bandit leader's dagger slashed at roots, severing some of them, but there were always others to take their place. Like snakes, they slithered up Gant's body, coiling around his throat, strangling the life from him as he struggled against them. Riggs dropped his dagger and physically tried to tear the roots away as Gant's face changed colors. In desperation, the bandit leader kicked at the fire. Burning twigs and logs scattered into the dry leaves and the writhing roots. A conflagration began to spread. The roots quickly retreated, releasing Gant, who fell to the ground and did not move. Anwyn wanted to cover his ears, but he could not, bound as he was. He swore he heard the whole grove screaming in pain.

"This place is cursed!" Riggs howled

and seized a burning branch of wood, waving it around him. His gaze fell on Anwyn. "And you're to blame!" the bandit snarled, "you and your strange silver eyes! You're one of the witchborn, aren't you? And witches ain't good for nothing but burning! I'll burn you and these cursed trees!"

Riggs rushed at Anwyn, brandishing the torch. The harper felt the mighty oak tremble in despair. *You're as frightened as I!* Anwyn thought. Of course, Dair would be helpless against fire, and Anwyn knew only one means to battle the element. He closed his eyes and called the Song of Rain, feeling its liquid essence draw from the very air. When he opened his eyes, Riggs stood quite close, leering in mad rage as he set fire to the oak's thinner branches. Anwyn felt Dair shrieking in pain. Ignoring the frightful sound, Anwyn opened his mouth and sang.

Water poured from the sky, washing down to douse the fire and Riggs's torch. The bandit gasped and tossed his torch aside. He drew his sword and reared back with a shout.

Roots came shooting out of the ground, closing about Riggs's ankles, climbing his limbs like vines. The bandit screamed and flailed at them with his sword, but for every tendril he cut, a dozen more took its place. They wrapped around him until only his face was visible. Once he was firmly entangled, they began slowly dragging him into the ground.

"Spare me, witch!" he cried, his gaze trying to lock Anwyn with its terrified stare. "Call off your beastly trees! Mercy!" But the harper turned away, unable to watch. *How many asked you for mercy before they died?* he thought miserably. He would not look again until the last of Riggs's horrified screams were muffled and devoured by the very earth into which he was drawn.

Silence followed, save the rustle of leaves as Gant's body was also pulled into those depths. Anwyn felt his ropes go slack, and glimpsed a root bearing Riggs's dagger sliding back into the loam. Weakly, Anwyn sank to the ground, bowing his head.

"Thank you, harper mage," came Dair's rumbling voice. Or was it merely the moan of the boughs in the wind? Anwyn shivered.

"For what?" he whispered.

"For saving us all from the flames," the Oak King said. "Had the fire spread, we would have all been consumed."



Artwork by James Balkovek

Anwyn did not bother to mention that he would like as not have lost his own life in the blaze. That fear drove him to call his spell, as much as good-hearted intentions. The rain had ceased, and the clear sky of early morning was barely becoming visible in the gray rime of the horizon.

"You are welcome," he said. Slowly, he rose and gathered his gear.

"You are leaving us now?" Dair said.

"It's close to dawn," Anwyn said.

"Then, take these with you," Dair said, and Anwyn suddenly found a root at his elbow offering him a small, worn sack. He took it and peered inside, then rolled several acorns out into his hand. "If you find a peaceful place where the soil is good, plant a grove, and if fortune is with you, the trees from these acorns will grow to be living wood."

Anwyn nodded, tipping the acorns back into the small sack and tucking it away in his satchel. Hoisting that and Glynnanis to his shoulders, he hurried

back to the road, eager to leave these strange woods behind.

"You could give them to Rhystar," Glynnanis suggested. "He'll know a good place to plant them."

"I suppose," Anwyn said, trudging on. After a moment of silent thought, he spoke again. "Will you do me a favor, Glynnanis?"

"What?" Glynnanis said.

"Remind me never to cut wood in a strange forest without first asking the tree's permission. The last thing I ever want to do is provoke an Oak King's wrath!"

"I shall!" Glynnanis said with a tinkling laugh, while all around them, the trees seemed to rustle with sighs of relief.

✱

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The Last Word

Last week, I nosed around the North Field of Oakland Airport (this is where the Cessnas and the Piper Cubs park, well away from the commercial jets), and then spent a half hour walking quietly around a smallish airplane in one of the hangers. She was obviously old but polished to a loving gleam by a crew of dreamers, people who are helping a Texas woman who wants to duplicate — and finish — Amelia Earhart's flight around the world. Earhart called her plane "the red bus", and this near-duplicate had shiny paprika paint on the leading edge of the wings. I had felt compelled — which surprised me — to see the plane as soon as I read the newspaper account of its arrival, and a brief bit about its resurrector and pilot, Linda Finch. The experience of seeing it choked me up almost to the point of tears. And then I actually got to exchange a few sentences with Finch herself: *Good luck*, I said; not original words, but heart-felt. Finch was good enough to offer her right hand even though mine was holding my camera; I quickly shifted the camera and was proud to move my right hand up to meet hers.

Not all fantasies deal with fairy prin-

cesses, or days gone by. It's nice to see someone, right now, living a dream, one that took a lot of hard work and involves some danger. Maybe there's some commercial hype involved — Pratt and Whitney donated a cool four million to aid the project, and perhaps they want publicity to match; and WorldFlight might be some outfit that hopes to persuade us of something or other. But it seems like a nice dream to share with the rest of us earthbound types. They have a web page at www.worldflight.com/youcansoar.

(I'll have the pictures I took of the plane, and of Finch, on my personal webpage soon; you can get to it via a link on the *MZBFM* page.)

But back to *FANTASY Magazine*. We have a cover sketch now for the next issue, drawn by Alicia Austin, and her fabulous interior illustrations for the story itself, one by Mary Aldridge. So you have something to look forward to as you finish this spring issue.

We have another India Edghill story lined up for you, as well as cover stories by Mercedes Lackey, by Susan Schwartz, and by Deborah Wheeler. Other stories awaiting publication are by Dorothy J. Heydt, Patricia Russo,

Janna Silverstein, Patricia Duffy Novak, Cynthia McQuillin, Richard Calantropio, Katherine Blake, Richard Purtill, and a humorous fantasy story by Darrell Schweitzer! We have stories by Laura J. Underwood (not an Anwyn story, though) and by Carrie Martin. We have two by talented newcomers, Yvonne Coats and Connie Wilkins. And more, of course.

Marion won't be at the WorldCon in San Antonio — she dislikes hot weather — but I will, and so will Elisabeth Waters. I have engaged to edit one of the daily newszines, which should be hectic but fun. Before that, I'll be at WisCon and at WesterCon.

Marion has other conventions that she will attend: BayCon, of course, where the magazine's tenth birthday will be celebrated, and ConDuit.

The Sword and Sorceress guidelines are available if you send a stamped, addressed envelope to P.O. Box 72, Berkeley 94701; Marion will begin reading for S&S #15 on April 20 and stop on May 15, 1997. Stories received after the deadline will not be read. So get out your pen, or your typewriter, or your computer, and **START**.

— Rachel E. Holmen

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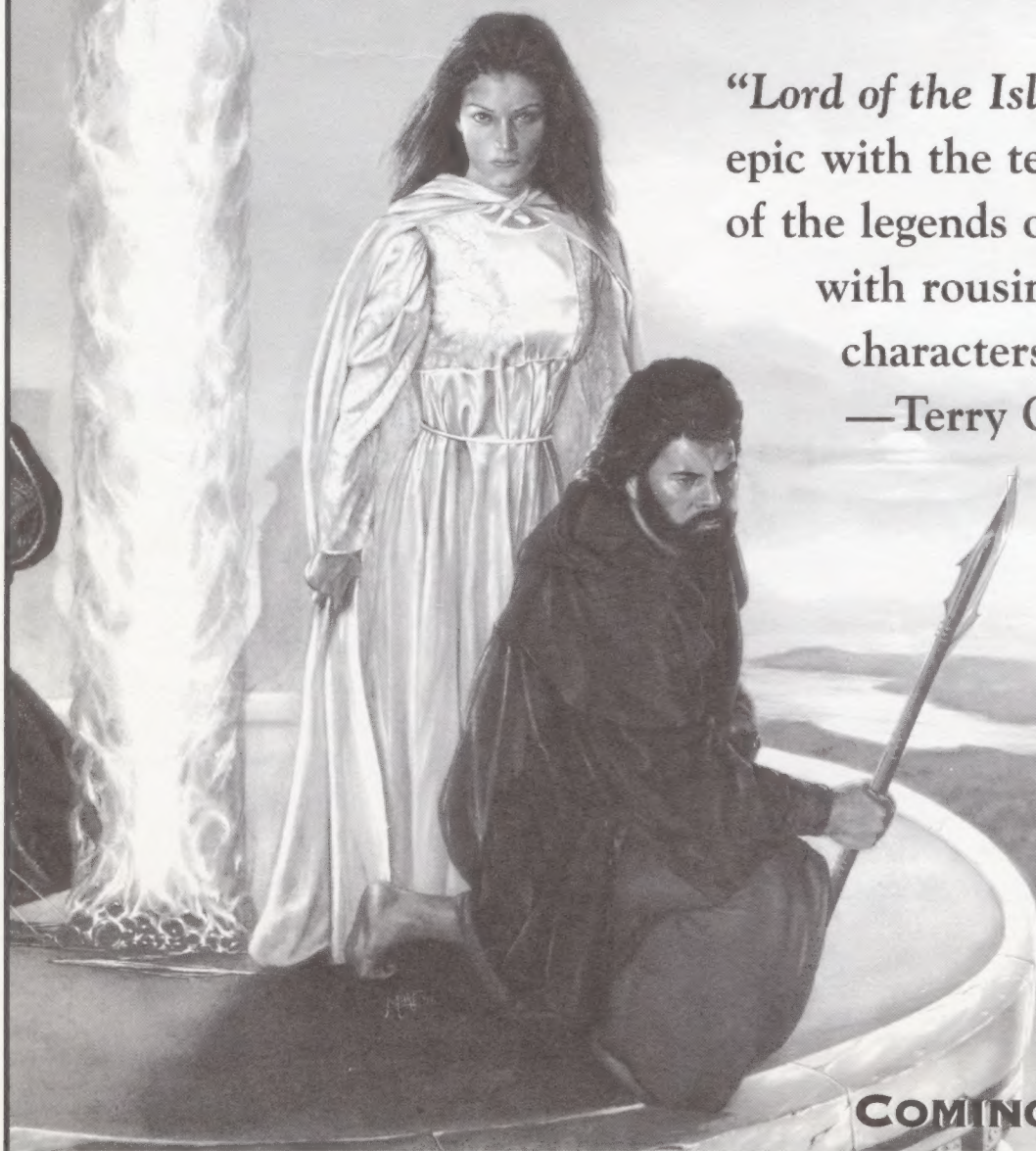
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